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Young emigrants on the Oregon, California, and Mormon trails, 1841-1866

Molly Kizer

University of Nebraska at Omaha

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YOUNG EMIGRANTS ON THE OREGON,
CALIFORNIA, AND MORMON TRAILS: 1841-1866

A Thesis

Presented to the

Department of History

and the

Faculty of the Graduate College

University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

University of Nebraska at Omaha

by

Molly Kizer

May 2000

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THESIS ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance for the faculty of the Graduate College,
University of Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Master of Arts Degree,
University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Committee

Name	Department/School
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<u>Harold A. Palstrom</u>	<u>History</u>
---------------------------	----------------

<u>Robert A. Girvan</u>	<u>Political Science</u>
-------------------------	--------------------------

Chairperson	<u>Michael L. Tate</u>
-------------	------------------------

Date	<u>May 11, 2000</u>
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ABSTRACT

Between 1841 and 1866, the years of heaviest traffic on the overland trails, approximately 500,000 people uprooted their families, departed their homes in the East and began the search for a new life in Oregon, California or Utah. During these three decades, eager pioneers pushed their way across half a continent and participated in one of the greatest of modern pilgrimages. The westward movement has been studied from the viewpoints of men, and, especially in recent years, from the viewpoints of women, but few historians have looked at the massive migration from the perspectives of younger emigrants. In the preface to his book Growing up with the Country, historian Elliott West has written that the study of western children, including those who made the journey west, is at best “embryonic.”

With the exception of the peak California gold rush years of 1849 and 1850, the movement was comprised mostly of families, which meant that a substantial number of overlanders were children and teenagers. Many of these young emigrants were the sons and daughters of risk-takers whose ancestors had continually pushed the borders of America westward, and their stories contribute significantly to the overall history of the westward experience. Importantly, the perceptions of young pioneers often differed from their older counterparts. In general, younger children felt fortunate to be a member of a family who had chosen to travel west, but they often had no concept of where they were going. They were less attached to their homes in the East

than were older children and adults who sensed that they were leaving relatives and friends forever. Young emigrants of all ages, unlike adults, were less concerned about the future than the present. Leave-taking was less emotional for them and they approached their journeys with a heightened sense of adventure, often lacking awareness of the vast scale of such an undertaking.

Even under the best of circumstances, the trip was demanding, and a successful journey hinged on the contributions of all family members. Many young emigrants were unaware of the immense amount of work that would be required of them or the emotional crosses they would have to bear. Each phase of the journey meant additional pressures for traveling families. Some families became closer, while others were torn apart. Still, most children adapted to their lives on the trail and arrived at their destinations in good spirits. These young pioneers were not mere observers, but rather were participants in a journey of over two thousand miles in which they endured incredible hardships with their families. The lives of those young emigrants, who were a vital part of the American westering process, deserves greater attention from historians and the public at large.

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INTRODUCTION

“Off They Go,” wrote Omaha World-Herald staff-writers, Julia McCord and Mary McGrath, referring to the wagons and travelers who left the Iowa School for the Deaf in Glenwood, Iowa on Saturday April 19, 1997. Headed for Miller Park in Omaha, Nebraska, near where the first Mormon pioneers wintered after they had fled their homes in Nauvoo in 1846, these modern-day pioneers planned to meet a second larger train and then depart on Monday, April 21st to retrace the steps of their Mormon ancestors. Joining the wagon train that served as a rolling commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the Mormon Trail was Shauna Dicken, great-great-granddaughter of emigrant Perrigrine Sessions. Sessions traveled to Utah with the “Pioneer Band” of Mormons under the guidance of Brigham Young who subsequently oversaw the journey of over 70,000 pioneers to the Salt Lake Valley. At Independence Rock in Wyoming, he chiseled his name on the granite rock referred to by nineteenth-century emigrants as the “register of the desert,” and in June 1997, Shauna Dicken and her four daughters ran their fingers across the name of their ancestor. The emotion of the moment transcended the 150 years that separated the generations of this family.

As the nineteenth century began, the United States found itself in competition with European nations for much of the western lands of North America. European fur companies, especially the British Hudson’s Bay Company, had already infiltrated the mountains of the northwest and had established Indian trading alliances. Alarmed that

Spain had ceded the Louisiana Territory to France, President Thomas Jefferson entered into negotiations with Napoleon to purchase the vast territory which gave the United States control of the Mississippi River Valley and encouraged settlement along the western frontier. In the fall of 1806, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark returned to St. Louis after completing their 9,000 mile journey in which they explored the uncharted upper regions of the Louisiana Territory for the United States. Their published journals, along with the 1840s journals of explorer John C. Frémont, aroused public interest in these western lands and laid the foundation for American settlement of these territories.

During the 1830s, Methodist, Protestant and Catholic missionaries established permanent American missions in the Pacific Northwest, and many religious advocates responded to their pleas to minister in the territory. Along with their husbands, Narcissa Whitman and Eliza Spaulding successfully made the journey to Oregon in 1836, proving that women could withstand the trip. In 1843, the Applegate families, along with a large caravan of wagons and stock, completed a trip to the rich agricultural lands of the Willamette Valley. Having lost two sons during their dangerous boat trip down the Columbia River, Jesse and Lindsay Applegate became committed to opening a safer southern route into Oregon, which they did in 1845. That same year, Samuel Barlow laid out a route for wagons from the Dalles south around Mt. Hood, thus avoiding the more dangerous river route. And, in 1844, the Stephens-

Townsend-Murphy party became the first emigrants to take wagons over the difficult summit of the Sierra Nevadas in California.

In 1846, after signing a treaty with Great Britain, the United States won sole title to the Oregon Country south of the 49th parallel. In less than a decade, “Oregon Fever” consumed the country, especially among restless settlers who lived in the Mississippi River Valley and whose own ancestors had pushed the borders of the United States perpetually westward. American acquisition of California from Mexico in 1848 and the simultaneous discovery of gold at Sutter’s Fort resulted in the rush to California. And, fleeing from religious persecution in Nauvoo, Illinois, the great Mormon migration to the Salt Lake Valley commenced in 1846.

Between 1841 and 1869, approximately 500,000 people departed their eastern homes in search of a new life in Oregon, California or Utah. With the exception of the peak gold rush years of 1849 and 1850, the westward migration was comprised mostly of families which meant that a substantial number of overlanders were young. For six months or more of their lives, these young emigrants traveled over plains, deserts and mountains, enduring incredible hardships along the way. Statistically, older teenaged girls and boys were most likely considered adults in that era, but, for purposes of this study, emigrants through the age of nineteen have been included within the sample. Most of these young overlanders left behind relatives, homes, friends, and everything that was familiar to them, knowing that they would never return. Adults sought land, gold, healthier climates, adventure, and a new beginning, and their children made the

journey with them. The roles of young emigrants were important since the success of an overland trip depended on the contributions of all family members. They too were expected to assume tremendous responsibility. Children actively participated in the westward migration and their stories were a mix of adventure, excitement, romance, misery, tragedy, and death.

Their experiences were recorded in diaries, letters, reminiscences and in the journals of parents or other adults with whom these children traveled. Some young emigrants such as Abigail Jane Scott and Ellen Burt were assigned the duty of keeping the family journal. Some, such as Welborn Beeson, Flora Isabelle Bender and Rachel Taylor, all fifteen-years-old during their overland trips, left exceptional diaries for their age. And other children, such as Maria Elliot, made cryptic journal entries at various intervals along the way “on cracker boxes and wagon tongues, or whatever was handy.” Reminiscences, like those later collected and published by The Washington Pioneer Project, The Oregon Transaction Association, Oregon journalist Fred Lockley, and Kate B. Carter, who compiled Mormon experiences, or those that were written down by a later generation of relatives, must be approached with caution as events often blurred with the passage of time and were susceptible to embellishment. Yet, with the use of evidence from similar corroborating eyewitness accounts, the validity of many of the descriptions can be verified.

In 1989, Eugene E. Snyder completed a study of 212 pioneers who settled in the Portland, Oregon area between 1840 and 1860. Using records of early land claims,

real estate transactions, old newspapers and family archival information, he presented a profile of a typical pioneer who settled in Oregon, many of whom had received land as a result of the Donation Land Act passed in September, 1850. Snyder found that a substantial number of these early settlers, perhaps one out of ten, lacked any literary skills. Often the signatures on their land claims were marked by an “X” in place of an actual signature. He concluded that many of these early pioneers grew up where there were no schools, that they grew up working on farms, and that many of them had led migratory lives. Taking this information into consideration, one would conclude that if the literary skills of children reflected those of their parents, few could read or write and thus relatively few kept daily accounts. Still, literacy in the 1850s was not an indication of a person’s intelligence or ability and, therefore, reminiscences complete the story.

One would also assume then that those who kept journals, spoke about preparations and commented on fascinating aspects of their overland trips were members of more affluent families. Undoubtedly, the socioeconomic status of a family and of a wagon train in general affected the overland experience and the comfort levels of young emigrants. Those children whose families prepared for the journey and joined a highly organized company were better off than those who traveled without families, or whose parents made last-minute decisions to go west. Many descriptions left by J.Goldsborough Bruff of the children who passed through his relief camp in the

Sierra Nevadas in 1849, for example, revealed that many children traveled under deplorable conditions, and very few of these children left accounts.

In 1846, overland traveler Edwin Bryant witnessed a birth, a death, a funeral and a wedding within two hours and within the radius of two miles, revealing that the westward migration encompassed more dramatic events than the normal ebb and flow of life in more bucolic surroundings. The history of the overland trails is a history of the daily experiences of traveling families who were united by the hope of a better life in a far distant land. Considering the number of emigrants who made the journey, the distance traveled, the hardships endured, and the results attained, the mid-nineteenth century migration to Oregon, California and Utah was a remarkable event, and one in which children played a vital role.

As I pause to reflect on the many people who deserve thanks for their support on this project, I first think back to my own childhood. My interest in the overland trails began in the early 1960s when my family moved from Spencer, Iowa to Omaha, Nebraska. As the oldest of eight children, I had many playmates on Lincoln Blvd. in Omaha where we would often climb on the boulder erected in 1912 by the Daughters of the American Revolution marking the site as a military road used by pioneers travelling to Oregon and California. My mother also frequently told us tales that her

grandmother had related of her own family who traveled by wagon from Wisconsin to Iowa in the 1880s. During my years in grade school, my parents often enjoyed spending weekends exploring the various cemeteries in the Omaha area, especially the Mormon cemetery at Winter Quarters where we spent at least one weekend day a year reading the inscriptions on the graves of those emigrants. I sincerely thank my late father, Dan Boulay, and my mother, Marilyn Boulay, whose love for history was passed down to many of her children and grandchildren.

During the course of this thesis, I have accumulated many academic debts. I genuinely thank Dr. Michael L. Tate, my committee chairman, teacher, and friend. His assistance with my topic and sources, his writing and editing skills, his knowledge of American frontier history, and especially his consistent encouragement were invaluable to me. I express special thanks to Dr. Harl Dalstrom, not only for his contributions as a member of my thesis committee, but also for his guidance throughout the course of my graduate work. Dr. Kent Kirwan of the UNO Political Science Department graciously served on my committee and I want to thank him for his input and especially for his time. The History Department at the University of Nebraska at Omaha has been very kind to me throughout the “many years.” I am also grateful to the staff at the inter-library loan department at the UNO Library and the staff members at the Nebraska State Historical Society and the Kansas State Historical Society.

Without the diary descriptions compiled by Merrill J. Mattes in his Platte River Road Narratives and the journals compiled, edited and published by Kenneth L. Holmes in the ten volumes of Covered Wagon Women, this undertaking would have been nearly impossible. Charles Martin of Omaha allowed me access to the many trail diaries that he collected over his years of service to the Oregon-California Trails Association. John Sederstrom at the National Frontier Trails Center in Independence, Missouri generously guided me through the Merrill Mattes Collection and xeroxed portions of the memoirs of Lorenzo Waugh. Those Trails Center volunteers who spent countless hours transcribing the many journals in that collection deserve special thanks. I also extend appreciation to Maureen Heher at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University for her assistance with the diary of John Lawrence Johnson, to Lisa Backman at the Denver Public Library for allowing me access to the Nellie Slater diary, and to the staff at the Huntington Library for assisting me with the Vincent Hoover diary. The staff at the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley was also helpful and I appreciate their following up on my requests for the diaries of Mary Ackley and Maria J. Elliot Norton.

On a more personal note, I would like to thank my sisters, Katie Bernth, Joan Boulay, Jessie Brumbach, and Stacy Ketcham. Stacy spent many hours willingly wading through my writing assignments throughout graduate school, and she, along with Katie, Joan, and Jessie, helped me stay focused on what was important. I will forever be in debt to these incredible women who not only provided me with needed

encouragement to pursue my academic interests, but also were there for me personally. Finally, thanks to my children, Leslie, Greg, and Josephine, who never failed to respond to my cries of “computer emergency” which were more frequent than I would like to admit.

CHAPTER ONE

MOTIVATIONS, PREPARATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS

Young Emigrants Embark on the Journey of a Lifetime

About sixty of Grandfather's children and their families assembled to bid the Fergusons a long farewell, as they were 'going away off there to be massacred by the Indians,' so said some of the grandmothers as they took us children up in their arms and kissed us a long goodbye.¹

— Henry O. Ferguson: age eleven at the time of his journey

Young Andrew Chambers, along with his father, mother, four brothers, two sisters and two sisters-in-law, was part of the overland migration of 1845. Leaving Morgan County Missouri, the Chambers family fell in with a company of fifty wagons to undertake their long, arduous trek to the Willamette Valley in Oregon. Even though the route of Lewis and Clark along the Missouri River to the mouth of the Columbia River had never become a transcontinental wagon road, Andrew remembered that his father's reading of the journals of Lewis and Clark's 1804-1806 expedition served as the inspiration for his family crossing the Great Plains.² Eleven-year-old Joaquin Miller also recalled never being so fascinated as one Sunday night in 1851 when his father brought home a book about the 1842-1846 explorations of John C. Frémont across the Central Plains. Every scene and circumstance became imprinted on his mind forever. After the Millers made their final decision to go to Oregon, Frémont's

maps were spread out on the table amid tallow dips for light, and his family poured over them in preparation for their journey.³

The Chambers and Millers were two of thousands of families who became discontented with life in the Mississippi River Valley during the middle of the nineteenth century and migrated west to Oregon, California and Utah. A speculative and unstable agricultural economy in the region, frequent sicknesses, unpredictable weather, a longing to get away from the controversial slavery issue, a desire to escape religious persecution, a passion to Christianize Indians, the discovery of gold, and, most importantly, the availability of free land in the Willamette Valley of Oregon were the key factors that motivated families to pack up all their worldly possessions and head west. Masses of emigrants responded to such push and pull factors when they left homes and kin to endure over two thousand miles of dust, disease and back-breaking work without knowing what lay ahead of them once their destination was reached. For individual families heading to Oregon or California with small groups or large organized companies, it was usually men, as heads of families, who made the decision to emigrate west, and women and children, willing or not, followed their lead. These were for the most part the sons and grandsons of pioneers who had already moved one or more times within the Ohio and Mississippi River Valleys, and to do so again seemed only natural.

By the 1830s, the Mississippi River Valley had passed beyond its initial frontier stage and much of the region truly shared in the national economy as its farms produced crop surpluses for the broader marketplace. Unfortunately, many of these western states plunged recklessly into internal improvements and land speculation. Easy money became widely available as American and English banks issued bonds

backed by an unreliable credit structure that was poorly regulated. A large amount of credit was used to buy land within newly developed areas, a reality especially enticing to younger sons of farmers because they seldom inherited enough good land to make a successful life.⁴ By 1829, prosperity was seemingly widespread, but the typical farmer was hopelessly in debt and terrified of losing equity in his land. English banks tightened credit in 1837, and many American banks subsequently collapsed under the pressure. Unrestrained speculation in land sales ended, but the Panic of 1837 took its toll on all economic classes. Agricultural prices dropped below the cost of production, and many overcommitted farmers were driven from their homes by mortgage lenders and tax collectors.⁵

During the same decades, many residents of the Mississippi River Valley physically suffered from a combination of fever and chills commonly referred to as ague. Most diarists attributed this infection to the extreme heat and cold of the region, and believed it undoubtedly would spread as more land was cultivated and populations grew. Many emigrants were only too glad to leave the malarial areas of Ohio, Michigan, Illinois and Missouri. In 1843, Daniel Waldo's wife told her husband that "if you want to stay here another summer and shake your liver out with the fever and ague, you can do it; but in the spring I am going to take the children and go to Oregon, Indians or no Indians. They can't be any worse than the chills and fever!"⁶ Craven Hester, a successful lawyer in Indiana, also made the decision to uproot his family and travel to California for health reasons. "My father is going in search of health, not gold," wrote fourteen-year-old Sallie Hester in 1849.⁷

In the early years of the Oregon-California migration, the decision to go west was not a simple one since the trip was extremely demanding even under the best of

circumstances. Some emigrants were filled with a gnawing spirit of adventure, but others possessed an almost unbearable fear of the unknown. Potential overlanders made momentous decisions to leave the relative security of their homes and seek better lives in a new land. In his authoritative trail study, The Plains Across, historian John D. Unruh, Jr. emphasized the difficulty that families faced in making such a life-altering decision amid conflicting reports that made it virtually impossible to sort fact from fiction. Newspaper articles and private letters sent east either painted a picture of paradise for farmers, or warned travelers of unknown perils and hardships. At least one writer contended that any man subjecting a family to a journey over mountains and deserts in search of worthless territory was obviously deranged, and that only those who were male, young and single should be allowed to indulge in such insanity.⁸

Despite countless warnings, thousands were swayed by such propagandists as Boston schoolmaster Hall Jackson Kelley who formed the American Society for Encouraging the Settlement of the Oregon Territory. In 1831, Kelley published a circular giving directions to and advertising the virtues of a land he had never seen. Devoting most of his life to promoting American settlement of the Pacific Northwest, Kelley described Oregon as “the most valuable of all the unoccupied parts of the earth. Its peculiar location and facilities, and physical resources for trade and commerce; its contiguous markets; its salubrity of climate; its fertility of soil . . . are sure indication that Providence has designed this last reach of enlightened emigration to be the residence of a people, whose singular advantages will give them unexampled power and prosperity.”⁹ Kelly’s circular further encouraged churches of different denominations to organize and settle Oregon in advance of the predicted emigration so that settlers would not lose their religious privileges or comforts.¹⁰

Many religious advocates came under the spell of Hall Kelley, including a band of Methodist missionaries led by Jason and Daniel Lee. The Lees, determined to carry the gospel to natives in the Willamette Valley, departed from Independence, Missouri in 1834. After four years of preaching in the new territory, Jason Lee returned home to solicit support for his mission which gave important publicity to the region of the Columbia River. Two years before Lee's return, Protestant missionary wives Narcissa Whitman and Eliza Spaulding and their husbands successfully made the journey to Oregon, demonstrating the feasibility of travel across the plains for women and possibly even children. Their famous Wailatpu Mission was subsequently founded on the Walla Walla River.¹¹ The first Roman Catholic Mission in Oregon was founded in 1840 by Jesuit Pierre-Jean De Smet who went on to establish several other missions in the Pacific Northwest. These early missionaries accounted for most of the American activity in Oregon in the 1830s, and thus laid the foundation for future agricultural settlement and acquisition of the region.¹²

In less than a decade after the Lees and Whitmans had established their permanent missions, "Oregon Fever" gripped the nation. Local and national newspapers described the region as having a mild climate, fertile soil, plentiful timber and abundant fishing. Responding to the new interest, President James K. Polk pressured a treaty with Great Britain in 1846 which gave the United States sole title to the Oregon country south of the 49th Parallel.¹³ Then came the added incentive of the Donation Land Claim Act of 1850 which stated that each single white male citizen eighteen years or older was entitled to 320 acres of land. If married, his wife could hold an additional 320 acres in her own right. Settlers had only to reside on and cultivate the land for four years. In the five years that the Donation Act existed, more

than 7,000 claimants acquired in excess of 2.5 million acres of land in the Pacific Northwest, with the largest number of land claims being located in the rich Willamette Valley.¹⁴ This legislation attracted farmers who were motivated by the prospect of free land and, as a result, the migration to Oregon was more family-oriented than the migration to California.¹⁵

Unlike Oregon, California initially did not receive extensive publicity and national boosterism. Nicholas Dawson, who accompanied the first group of emigrants to California in 1841, was disappointed in the region, even describing it as a land of “semiarid deserts where burned vegetation testified to the lack of summer rainfall.”¹⁶ The search for adventure and the attraction of cheap land in both California and Oregon were the twin motivations for this first planned overland emigration. Known as the Bidwell-Bartleson Party, this group was organized in St. Louis, Missouri, and was thoroughly dedicated to the goal of permanent settlement in a rich agricultural area. All of the members of the Bidwell-Bartleson Party were admittedly green recruits, and none had ever traveled west of Missouri’s settled frontier. Fortunately, the party traveled with a group of Jesuit missionaries, and were led by experienced mountain man Thomas Fitzpatrick until they reached Soda Springs where thirty-three emigrants split off from the original sixty-nine and headed for California.¹⁷

Because they chose to go to California rather than continuing with the contingent of Oregon-bound emigrants, this group, led by John Bidwell, faced difficult and dangerous desert terrain for which they were poorly prepared. Maps were inaccurate, and it was uncertain if a natural highway to the coast south of the Columbia River even existed. Among these first California trailblazers was an eighteen-year-old mother, Nancy Kelsey, who was pregnant at the time, and her six-

month-old daughter, Ann, the first known white child to cross the plains. Married at sixteen, Nancy was the daughter of restless pioneers and the first white woman to reach California overland. Difficult terrain forced the party to leave their wagons east of Salt Lake, and the company set out on horseback. Her feet blistered, Nancy Kelsey walked most of the way, carrying Ann with each tortured step.¹⁸

While the Bidwell-Bartleson party successfully reached Sutter's Fort, they had been compelled to abandon their wagons before crossing the Sierra Nevada mountains. Other early travelers and fur traders confirmed that where the two trails divided in present-day Idaho, the hardships and dangers of the California Trail exceeded those of the Oregon route in the 1840s.¹⁹ Not deterred by such information, however, was Martin Murphy, Sr. who, along with his extended family, traveled with the first group of emigrants to successfully cross the summit of the Sierra Nevadas with wagons in 1844. Murphy departed his homeland of Ireland in 1820 in search of a "larger freedom" in America, where he eventually settled on a Canadian farm near Quebec. He again relocated in 1840 to Holt County, Missouri until malaria claimed the lives of his wife, three daughters and a son. These sad events, plus the lack of a formal Catholic educational system in Holt County, persuaded Murphy to take the remaining members of his family to the then-Mexican province of California where Catholicism was the established religion.²⁰

The Murphy clan had a long tradition of moving, which meant that the children were used to leaving homes and friends that they would never see again. The family joined a well-organized group of ten families, later named the Stephens-Murphy-Townsend Party. As the only group headed for California in 1844, these first pioneers crossed the desert regions of Nevada, later to become known as the "forty mile

desert,” and subsequently encountered the icy waters of the Truckee River and the seemingly insurmountable Sierra Nevadas. This difficult passage was the first journey of its kind, and it required courage and stamina, especially for the sixteen children traveling with the pioneer band.²¹ Their success, added to the publication of the journals of John C. Frémont the same year, helped to dispel rumors that California was not easily accessible and resulted in some emigrants making plans to travel to California. One man who set out for California in 1846 before gold was discovered and before the territory had been won from Mexico was James Reed. Along with the Donner brothers and their families, Reed and his family commenced their journey from Illinois. Well outfitted, the party decided to take the infamous Hastings’ Cut-Off running south of the Great Salt Lake, and, as a result, these emigrants became trapped by early snows in the Sierra Nevadas. Despite efforts to escape and attempts by others to rescue them, nearly half of the original eighty-seven members died of cold and starvation, with some resorting to cannibalism in order to stay alive. The news of the ill-fated Donner-Reed party shocked the nation and again emphasized the difficulty of reaching California.²²

American acquisition of California from Mexico in 1848, and persuasive letters to the eastern press by John Sutter and John Marsh reignited interest in California and hastened emigration. But it was news of the discovery of gold in California in 1848 that truly awakened the dreams of those who wanted to gain the fortune that had previously eluded them. Motivated by rumors that gold lay scattered on the ground, plentiful, free and unclaimed, most California-bound emigrants came not to settle, but to seek their fortunes and then return home to their families. Companies were quickly formed, ranging from loosely organized small groups of men

to highly organized larger groups who banded together for mutual protection.²³ Those caught up in the massive California gold rush altered the course of history according to Unruh, who wrote that the “forty-niners influenced national and world population movements, economies, finance, politics, transportation and settlement patterns.”²⁴

For many, like Mary and Josiah Variel, the lure of gold was especially difficult to resist. These parents of a three-month-old son and three-year-old daughter, considered making the trip to California for three years before finally departing from New Harmony, Indiana in April 1852. Mary later recalled that “my husband and I were greatly interested in the inducements that a trip to California offered, and while we frequently discussed the possibilities of such a venture, we were thoroughly alive to and considered fully the toil, danger and uncertainty that would attend it, but countless stories of boundless gold fields, where we could go out with a basket and pick up a supply of gold nuggets at any time overcame any fears we had entertained, and we concluded to join the first expedition that was organized in our neighborhood.” Mary and Josiah Variel expected to be gone only two years, certainly enough time for everyone to collect enough gold and return home wealthy, or so they mistakenly thought.²⁵

In 1859, the family of sixteen-year-old Charles Frederick True of Owatonna, Minnesota packed all their worldly goods and set out for California, not for gold, but to escape the all-too-frequent terrors of blizzards and thunderstorms on the northern plains. The family had often been forced to flee to the stronger house of a neighbor in the event of threatening weather, and their chances at successful farming were marginal at best. True remembered that his parents shared the belief that there were no hardships too severe and no sacrifices too great for reaching this new western land.²⁶

Weather was also a factor for Susannah and Daniel Bagley of Princeton, Illinois who depended on getting their crops to market in Chicago, where, in 1850, railroads had only begun construction. Their son, ten-year-old Clarence, had memories of his father complaining of the torrid heat in summer and arctic cold in winter which prevented even a healthy man from making a decent living. And, as with other emigrants, weather was not the only factor entering into the Bagleys' decision to join the 1852 migration to Oregon. Daniel Bagley was inspired by an Annual Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church in Baltimore to become a missionary and to establish a branch of this church in Oregon.²⁷

The pioneering efforts of overlanders bound for Oregon and California contributed to the success of another group who looked west for solutions to their problems. Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), or Mormons, founded in New York in 1830 by the prophet Joseph Smith, were the best organized group of pioneers to migrate west. The Saints attempted to establish their religious headquarters first in Ohio and then Missouri. In 1839, after these attempts failed, they hoped to find peace in the small city of Nauvoo, Illinois on the banks of the Mississippi River. But, the practice of plural marriage among some believers and economic and political jealousies among their Gentile neighbors inevitably created an atmosphere of tension and instability wherever they settled. Within five years of creating the Nauvoo community, LDS members began to suffer persecutions and killings at the hands of their neighbors.²⁸

In 1844, the Prophet Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum were arrested on trumped up charges of riot and treason. Despite being promised protection, the brothers were murdered while confined to the nearby Carthage jail. Successor

Brigham Young realized the need to move to a place where Mormons could practice their faith in semi-isolation, a place that would not attract other settlers within the coming decades.²⁹ The Saints were urged to prepare for an “exodus . . . to a far distant region of the west, where bigotry, intolerance and insatiable oppression lose their power.”²² In 1846, Young organized his Mormon followers into groups of hundreds, fifties and tens to cross Iowa. These first pioneers laid over in the temporary, death-ridden “Winter Quarters,” near present day Omaha, Nebraska, over one thousand miles from their destination of the Great Salt Lake Valley in Utah. When they arrived in their wilderness Zion, this first group of about two thousand emigrants began planting, cultivating and irrigating to prepare for those who would follow them. By 1856, nearly 40,000 LDS members had emigrated to Utah, including many new converts from Europe who made it by rail to the Midwest before undertaking the trek across the plains. Between 1856 and 1860, many pulled their belongings in handcarts which were used by the second major wave of the Mormon migration. Relay teams from Salt Lake brought supplies to companies on the trail, further contributing to the unparalleled organization of the Utah Saints.³⁰

For parents of Mormon children, the decision was to join the unpredictable exodus with Brigham Young or stay behind in the deteriorating conditions at Nauvoo, Illinois, where some “Gentiles,” a term Mormons used to refer to all non-Mormons, were becoming increasingly hostile. In his youth, Jesse Nathaniel Smith shared the trying experience of those Mormons who crossed the plains in their covered-wagon exodus of 1846. At age eleven, Jesse witnessed the mob spirit manifested in Nauvoo. Because of the threat of an all-out Gentile attack on the town, the family began preparing for the journey west. Jesse’s parents believed in the dream of Brigham

Young and that he would lead them to a place of safety where they could worship freely without persecution. For Jesse, nothing was more gratifying than joining the lead company of Saints.³¹

Seven-year-old Rachel Woolley was only one of thousands of Mormon children who filed past the coffins of Prophet Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum after they were murdered. Four years later, after witnessing homes and barns being burned, livestock stolen and neighbors persecuted, her family decided to leave Nauvoo for Salt Lake City. It was difficult for her mother who was expecting a baby, but the Woolley's successfully crossed the Mississippi River before Rachel's father got word that another mob had destroyed many houses. It was said that following their attack the Woolley's home was in an "awful state, the doors were off the hinges, the windows broken, and the well almost filled up with rubbish."³²

Another young Mormon residing in Nauvoo during this uncertain and dangerous time was Edwin Alfred Pettit. Thirteen at the time of his westward trek in 1847, Edwin had suffered the deaths of both of his parents within two weeks of each other in 1842, leaving him and his siblings to be cared for by a court-appointed guardian. His older sister and her husband decided to go west with the initial 1846 migration groups that were leaving Nauvoo. Edwin was determined to go with her, despite opposition from the rest of his siblings and his guardian. In an effort to catch up with his sister, Edwin and a friend secretly slipped out of his house and tramped all day with nothing to eat. Hunting parties failed to find the boys who stayed out on the Iowa prairie alone rather than going into camp where they might be discovered. Then, disguised as a girl, wearing false curls and a sunbonnet, Edwin successfully crossed the Des Moines River on a flat boat in the company of several other girls, with the

boatman none the wiser. Cautiously, the youth rode side-saddle behind an old friend, thus evading any further efforts to return him to Nauvoo, and at last reaching his sister's camp near a place called Indian Creek. The small company reached Winter Quarters in the spring of 1847, joining the main body of Saints who had been camped there all winter.³³

Many Saints residing in Nauvoo at this turbulent time had already made tremendous sacrifices and had hoped that the Mormon city would be their final destination. Typical was William McDonald, twelve-years-old in 1846, whose parents, James and Sarah McDonald, had joined the Church in Ireland in 1841, sold their belongings, and traveled to America. The McDonalds were driven out of Nauvoo, but were not equipped to join the first exodus to the Salt Lake Valley with Brigham Young. The family found work with a Missouri farmer and lived for three years, laboring with his slaves. "He was very bitter against the Mormons," noted William, "but treated us very well." James McDonald often entertained the slaves with his Irish singing and dancing. When news of his musical ability reached his employer, the McDonalds were invited to perform in the main house and continued to do so for the duration of their stay in return for flour, bacon, sugar and other provisions which they carefully stored away in the hope of joining the rest of the Saints in Salt Lake City. In the spring of 1850, their dreams were realized and the McDonalds became part of the Mormon migration that year. But, after years of preparation and sacrifice, James McDonald succumbed to cholera and was dead within one day during their journey. Recounted his son, "That was the gratest triel we ever had in our family . . . so sudent on the dreary plains of America."³⁴

Children who were not part of a larger religious contingent often voiced simple

reasons for wanting to go west. Sixteen-year-old Margaret Sutton wanted to go because “the rest is going,” and her twelve-year-old brother, Franklin Stewart was anxious to cross the mountains and smell the sea breeze.³⁵ Benjamin Franklin Bonney, seven-year-old member of the 1845 migration, recalled his father hearing that Oregon had an abundant supply of fish. The enticement of catching salmon and trout appealed to Benjamin and his family of fishermen.³⁶ Shortly after her seventeenth birthday in 1857, a trip across the plains to California became a reality for Martha Ann Wooten. She feared the dangers of the trip, especially Indians and crossing streams without bridges, but the possibility of acquiring large amounts of money appeared worth the risk. Martha also looked forward to the trip because she had heard that flour bread was routinely carried, and that it had to be used while crossing the plains since corn meal did not keep long. The Wootens were from Missouri where corn was plentiful and corn bread a staple. But the children were tired of it, and they considered flour bread a dietary reward.³⁷

Yet, there were also young people whose motivations were more pressing and complex, as was the case with the four sons of Danford and Amanda Warren. The couple had married in 1830 at Steuben County, New York where Amanda bore four boys within six years. The family was filled with hope and happiness when, without warning, Danford died at the age of thirty-one from what his fourth son Daniel Knight Warren termed “brain fever.” Amanda dutifully supported her little brood by spinning wool and flax, making clothes for her family and for others. Even though the boys worked hard to assist their mother for five years, conditions worsened after their mother’s unfortunate second marriage. According to Daniel, the brutality of his stepfather merited recollection because of the direct bearing it had upon the Warren

boys undertaking their later journey to Oregon alone. In Steuben County the neighbors were so outraged at the stepfather's cruelty that they drove him from the community, and he then went to Illinois and subsequently to the Far West. Promising Amanda that he was reformed, and after making a favorable impression on the boys' uncle, the stepfather was allowed to return home.³⁸

Together the family moved to Princeton, Illinois in 1848 where their existence proved as unhappy as before. The Warren boys found work with neighbors from whom the stepfather attempted to collect their pay, and they were forbidden to see their mother. Such treatment made it imperative for these young boys to break forever all home ties, and separation from their devoted mother became the least of evils. In 1852, the four boys, the oldest but twenty, and the youngest, Daniel, only sixteen, put together their earnings and fitted out a four-horse team for Oregon. They paid Thomas Mercer of Princeton \$100 each for passage in his train, and they did their share of the work, which included guard duty every fourth night. The young Warrens managed to escape the wrath of their stepfather, but like others, they soon found that hard work was as necessary in Oregon as it had been in Illinois. Their combination of desperation and determination gave them the strength to make a journey that ultimately would assure their independence.³⁹

Born in Wayne County, Indiana in 1828, Jacob Wright Harlan lost his mother when he was but two-years-old, and, like the Warrens, he was the victim of a cruel stepmother. Her discipline became more severe as the child grew older, and Jacob's father soon found it clear that his wife and son could not live under the same roof. Realizing this, Jacob went to work for his uncle Elijah Harlan in Kosciusko County, Indiana. This uncle was also the father of a son, John, about six months older than

Jacob, and two young girls. It was not long before Elijah Harlan became notorious for working his son and nephew Jacob beyond exhaustion. Finally, this proved too much for John, who sickened and died, while Jacob became so ill from overwork and undue exposure to cold that the doctor felt he too could not live much longer. Being of no further use to Elijah, the ailing Jacob was sent to another uncle, George Harlan, who lived in Michigan with his wife and six children. After reading Lansford Hastings' The Emigrant's Guide to Oregon and California, Harlan decided to emigrate to California. Seventeen-year-old Jacob accompanied his uncle's family which left Michigan in 1845 and wintered in Lexington, Missouri. Here, Jacob found the chance to earn wages doing field work for a farmer who owned over 400 slaves. During this time, he attended a slave auction which was enough to increase his determination to earn enough wages to pay for his full journey west. The slaves were in an enclosure where men, women and children were sold off rapidly without regard to the forced separation of family members. The cruelty affected young Jacob deeply, and his feelings of sadness and disgust made him anxious for spring and the ability to leave Missouri.⁴⁰

Slavery also provided the opportunity for some young African-Americans to leave the South, as was the case with Amanda Gardener Johnson. Proud of the fact that she was never sold nor bartered, Amanda, at age seven, was given to Nancy Wilhite Corum of Liberty, Missouri as a wedding present. Nancy, in turn, gave Amanda to her daughter Lydia when she married Anderson Deckard. In 1853, when Amanda was nineteen-years-old, the Deckards decided to go to Oregon. Knowing that slaves could not be held in Oregon, Deckard was offered \$1200 for his desirable house servant, but instead of accepting the money, he offered Amanda her freedom and the

chance to stay in Missouri where she had been raised. Though touched by Deckard's generosity, she was, however, afraid to accept such an offer because "the word of a Negro" had no value in court, and any white man could take her at any time, claiming she had been stolen. She decided to cross the plains with the Deckards at which time she met and married Benjamin Johnson, also a slave who was traveling to Oregon in the same year with the same company. Both Amanda and Benjamin chose to work on the donation-land-claim of Anderson Deckard, and they dutifully served several generations of the Deckard family.⁴¹

Having no choice in the decision to leave their Missouri home were the three small children of Jacob Hoppe and his wife, who, in 1846, experienced unusual hardships in the initial stages of their journey to Sutter's Fort, California. According to fellow traveler, Heinrich Lienhard, the Hoppe family would camp at a distance from the rest of the wagons, causing others to become curious about their motivations. They would usually hide somewhere in the vicinity and not appear until the next day when the party broke camp and departed. A rumor circulated that Hoppe had killed a slave in Missouri and was forced to hurriedly cross the state border to escape possible punishment. Although the Hoppe children did not keep a journal of their experiences, Lienhard's description of the children's isolation testified to their special difficulties.⁴²

For children, when the time for leave-taking arrived, perceptions were especially relevant. Unlike their parents, children were not as concerned about the long-term implications of the trip, but rather with the immediate experience. Many were unclear about their family's purpose for making the trip. The youngest children did not recognize the enormity of their undertaking, frequently having little conception of where they were going. Years after his overland trip, William A. Hockett, nine-

years-old in 1852, remembered his company being organized, but he did not recall what prompted his family to take the trip.⁴³ To seven-year-old Jesse Applegate, member of the prominent Applegate company of 1843, Oregon was a “word without meaning,” and he decided not to make any more inquiries about his family’s destination.⁴⁴ As a small boy, Henry Gilfry emigrated during 1852. It was April 1st, “All Fool’s Day,” when the Gilfrys left McDonough County, Illinois. Henry possessed enduring memories not only of relatives, but also of neighbors shouting to the departing emigrants that their journey into the wild was nothing but a “fool’s errand,” adding distress to an already apprehensive child.⁴⁵

When families left their hometowns, the grief and anguish were frequently overwhelming to younger children who often seemed puzzled at the intensity of their parents’ feelings. However, for those children old enough to understand that they were forever leaving the homes of their childhood, departure was typically a bittersweet experience. Although only eleven-years-old in 1845, Nancy Osborne recalled vivid scenes of clasping hands and cascading tears during the April morning that she left Henderson County, Illinois. Yet, she felt lucky to be one of the children in the wagon embarking on the adventure of a lifetime.⁴⁶ George Washington Bean, a lad of sixteen in 1847, was one of many teenage boys launching forth on a journey of over two thousand miles with the responsibility of driving a team of four oxen. George was old enough to feel full of hope, and yet, at the same time, he was saddened by the thought of leaving friends and frightened by the unknown perils and hardships that lay ahead.⁴⁷ The father of eleven-year-old Lucy Ann Henderson, who had lost his farm because he had allowed a friend to use his property as collateral on a note of security, removed her from a boarding school in Liberty, Missouri to move to Oregon where land was

“free.” Being a sociable girl with many friends at the exclusive Clay Academy, Lucy left for Oregon with mixed emotions. And, like other young people, she became dependent on her parents and other family members for the companionship and security that she previously had received from friends.⁴⁸

Children left cherished pets and watched as parents sold their farms and childhood homes, complete with all the belongings. In 1851, after his parents made the decision to sell their property in Illinois and move to Oregon, fifteen-year-old Welborn Beeson began keeping a diary to record his thoughts about such a remarkable year. Welborn assisted his father with preparations throughout the winter. Boiling the ox bows for the wagon and tying them so as to give them the right shape was but one of many difficult tasks requiring a great deal of physical strength from father and son. The young teenager lamented that it was difficult to part with things that had been dear to his family such as clocks, chairs, tables and books, but it was excruciatingly painful when he was forced to shoot his “good old cat Socrates to keep him from fretting” when gone. Finally, the inevitable departure became a reality and the wagons pulled out amid farewells. Welborn’s diary entry of March 16th, 1853 described three young boys in his emigrating party who sadly played in the Grandville brass band for the last time. The many neighbors and friends who followed them for miles remained in his memory forever.⁴⁹

Whether a family traveled in the 1840s, 1850s, or as late as the 1860s, outfitting was an essential part of the process. Children spoke of endless preparations for the journey, preparations which often lasted a year or more. Thirteen-year-old Catherine Scott, along with her five sisters, helped with preparations throughout the winter preceding the April morning in 1852 that the Scotts made the final start from

their childhood home in Illinois. The women and girls busied themselves with such tasks as sewing pockets in wagon covers, preparing supplies of food and medicine, and making blankets, stockings, sunbonnets, hickory shirts and gingham aprons by tallow light, many times through tears and with trembling fingers. Heartaches were figuratively stitched, knitted and woven into garments for a journey that assuredly promised no return.⁵⁰

Getting heavy equipment ready for such a massive undertaking was generally the responsibility of the men and boys. Wagons had to be strong enough for the rocky journey, but not too heavy for draft animals to pull. The Scott wagons were “gorgeous in green and yellow paint, with stout covers snugly adjusted over supple hickory bows, and stood just beyond the yard gate, ready for human occupancy. The stores of bacon, flour, of rice and coffee, of brown sugar and hard tack, had been carefully disposed.”⁵¹ With everything packed that could be justified as a necessity, it was time for the Scott children to face the final heartbreak of departure. Like Welborn Beeson who necessarily shot his cat, the Scotts were compelled to bid their dog, whom they called Watch, a tearful goodbye. Seeing the old dog howling on the distant shores of the Illinois River while the family ferried across was almost unbearable, wrote sixteen-year-old Abigail Jane Scott, main chronicler of their journey. After arriving in Oregon, the children learned in a letter from their grandfather that the dog went back to the family home and refused to eat, dying a short time later.⁵²

That same year, Susan Angell, her husband and their ten-month-old daughter, Sarah, joined a train consisting of a dozen or more families and neighbors who struck out from New London, Iowa across the plains to California. Susan remembered that their equipment consisted of one covered light wagon drawn by mules, in which was

loaded a crib, bed and other essentials for making the journey comfortable for herself and the baby. The Angells, like others with small infants, took dairy cows which provided milk for the party. It was soon discovered that the milk, when placed in a container and carried in the wagons, would become churned into butter by the continued jolting of the wagon over the rough roads, thus providing this luxury to the party.⁵³

Departing from Whitewater, Wisconsin in October, 1852 to winter in Illinois and join the 1853 migration was ten-year-old Ellen Burt, one of the ten Burt children, who kept the family diary. Thomas Fletcher Royal, traveling with the Burts, described their wagon as surrounded by seats that projected out over the wheels. When the roads were in relatively good shape, the three boys and seven girls rode in the wagon, spending their time reciting history, spelling, learning multiplication tables and singing. This “Band Wagon” was a “veritable country school on wheels.”⁵⁴ Ironically, however, it was the “Reed Wagons,” as they were called in 1846, and described by Virginia Reed Murphy, member of the Donner-Reed Party, that were among the best-equipped group of wagons to cross the plains.⁵⁵

Twelve-years-old at the time, Virginia described their wagons as “made to order,” consisting of a “pioneer palace” car with a side entrance, a large second floor, spring seats and a small sheet-iron stove. James Reed, Virginia’s stepfather, was anxious to accommodate his seventy-five-year-old mother-in-law, Sarah Keyes, who was in delicate health. Reed had married Virginia’s widowed mother, Margaret Wilson Keyes Backenstoe, and they went on to have four more children, of which three made the journey, the fourth having died only months before departure.⁵⁶

Leaving from Springfield, Illinois with the Reeds were the families of George and

Jacob Donner. Although not outfitted in the splendor of the Reeds, the Donners were equipped with the necessities for starting anew, and with such small luxuries as bolts of cotton prints, mirrors, and other items of jewelry to be used as “peace offerings” for the Indians.⁵⁷

Most overlanders completed their outfits at Independence, Westport, and St. Joseph, Missouri, or Kaneshville, Iowa, which was renamed Council Bluffs in 1853. The amount of time spent at these “jumping-off” places depended on such circumstances as the year of travel, ultimate destinations, weather conditions, and the extent of prior preparations. The date of spring departure depended on when the plains grasses would be sufficiently green to support the oxen. For many emigrants who already had their wagons and outfits, it would not have been necessary to stop at the outfitting towns had they not needed to cross the Missouri River in order to reach the trails. Like adults, children reacted to the towns, stores and merchants—generally the last that they would see until the end of their journey.

Whether they experienced these early towns as part of the emigration or they lived nearby, children and teenagers frequently found the bustling activity new, strange and thrilling. During the winter of 1844-45, St. Joseph had a new sensation according to young observer, F.A. Goulder. This very contagious epidemic known as “Oregon Fever” had been raging for several years until it had affected all classes and conditions of people. All through the winter months, Oregon meetings were the order of the day. Goulder remembered that every Saturday afternoon the people from the country would come thronging into town to experience a most interesting time. A man referred to as “Uncle Fred” Waymire would “come with his overcoat pockets crammed with letters and papers upon the subject that we all had most at heart . . . and

the principle attraction for the crowd was packages and letters written by Peter H. Burnett who had gone to Oregon in 1843.”⁵⁸ Pouring over new information and listening to exciting stories was infectious, especially in a town that looked forward to spring, a time when trains would supply themselves and depart.

After the discovery of California gold in 1848, merchants of the Missouri River frontier towns began to compete for the increasing emigrant trade. Oftentimes hundreds of wagons were waiting to be ferried over the Missouri River, leading to arguments, and sometimes fatal shootings over questions of precedence. Family members held their places in line day and night. Despite their relatively small size, these towns were crucial as staging areas, centers of supply and sources of information. According to historian John D. Unruh, Jr., the overlanders “filled their days and nights with frenzied activity: seeking out bargains at street auctions, organizing traveling companies, drawing up constitutions, electing officers, warding off criminals and confidence men, visiting the many taverns and grogshops, and getting too little sleep as they pondered whether the motivations impelling them westward were worth braving all that the rumormongers claimed lay ahead.”⁵⁹

The days or weeks spent in Independence, St. Joseph, Council Bluffs and later Omaha became what many believed was their last chance to enjoy a “civilized” environment. The family of fourteen-year-old Sallie Hester expected to remain at St. Joseph for several days waiting for a turn to be ferried over. She described the emigration as “so great that you can see nothing but wagons. . . . This town presents a striking appearance, a vast army on wheels as far as the eye can reach with crowds of men women and lots of children, and last but not least, the cattle and horses upon which our lives depended.”⁶⁰

In 1852, nine-year-old Mary Ellen Todd shared this view of the many phases of camp life in Independence. Remaining there nearly a week, she observed that other wagons kept coming in until there were no places left to camp: “Seated up in our spring seat, I liked to sit and watch all those people and animals about their camps. There were dog fights, children fights, and word quarrels, but I loved best to see those children playing with their pet animals. Some even had cats and chickens, and I liked to look into the faces of every ox and cow as they were taken out. They often reminded me of some people we knew.”⁶¹ Mary Ellen’s family was one of only four families in their departing company that did not turn back. Discussions of impending dangers soon became a reality, proving unbearable to the timid. Having seen livestock and even the bodies of people who had drowned in the first Missouri River crossing, some emigrant men were already faint of heart. Some women and children were even more expressive as they cried and begged to return home. The sound of stinging lashes frightened children as their fathers and teamsters forced cattle to make the plunge that nearly all resisted, requiring all the skill of the driver to bring them into some kind of order.⁶²

In 1849, even though Orson Hyde, Mormon editor of the Kanesville Frontier Guardian, described his town as being located on the “extreme frontier,” he still promoted it as the “most eligible place on the river” for emigrants to outfit and begin their journeys. A circular drawn up by citizens, advertised the town as having at least six stores with unlimited stocks of manufactured goods and foods. The Missouri River was also navigable to this point, and, by 1852, the Kanesville-Omaha area, which began as a Mormon way station, became the “jumping-off” place of choice. Like St. Joseph, the air in Council Bluffs was thick with rumors and excitement. Tales from

returning emigrants, especially of Indian threats, instilled fear in children of all ages.⁶³

Also, for the first time in their lives, many sheltered young people saw a darker, seedier side of life than they had previously experienced. Traveling with his large extended family, Orson Stearns considered Kanesville/Council Bluffs to be “the rendezvous of all the worst elements in society.” The lad of eleven had all he could do to escape the threats of an older boy with a knife who accused him of stealing and breaking his sister’s things.⁶⁴ In his newspaper, Orson Hyde called for parents to control their children or leave town: “We have been afflicted and disturbed for some time in our town by a set of very unruly boys, till at length, their parents neglecting to curb them, the civil authorities had them arrested and tried, and one of the ring leaders fined twenty-five dollars and cost of the suit.” He further added that their behavior of yelling like a “pack of wolves” could not be tolerated if the town was to remain peaceful to both residents and emigrants passing through.⁶⁵

A somewhat negative and congestive image was also revealed by Welborn Beeson who noted that the town was “very muddy, with nothing but gambling houses and nasty water.”⁶⁶ Charles True, whose family had only a few hours in Omaha to complete the task of stocking up for a long arduous journey, realized for the first time the sheer volume of this great westward movement. Entering the only business street in Omaha in 1859, Charles wrote that, “we found ourselves elbowing our way through the crowds to the few business places to find and purchase the miscellaneous articles required.”⁶⁷ It was a time when throngs of determined overlanders created an atmosphere of romance and adventure that was fed by all ages and all types of human beings.

As emigrant traffic increased, it was not uncommon for overlanders to spend

days in an outfitting town frantically searching for family members or friends with whom they planned to travel west. Two young victims of the chaos in Council Bluffs were Harry Roberts, age ten, and his sister, Mary, age sixteen. They were assigned to Captain Henry Chipman's train which was the largest Mormon wagon train of 1857. The children's father remained in England, and their mother had gone to Salt Lake City four years earlier, where she anxiously awaited the arrival of her children. Ann Roberts had sent supplies for the children's journey with a teamster whom she trusted. Harry and Mary, however, never received the gloves, heavy blankets, walking shoes and money from the teamster who claimed that he was not able to find the children at the Missouri River camp. Their lack of preparation soon became evident as Harry shivered through many nights during their journey, using only his sister's petticoat for a blanket.⁶⁸

Another crucial aspect of emigrant preparation was the formation of companies, a process which contributed to the lively activity in the frontier Missouri River towns. The need to organize resulted in disagreements, and sometimes split up companies at a later juncture of the trip. Fathers of many pioneer children who organized companies or were voted captains or officers of their trains took this responsibility seriously. In 1861, William Colvig was six-years-old when his father held an auction in Parkville, Missouri and sold everything that the family could not take to Oregon. Along with four other men, Dr. Colvig reviewed applications for prospective membership in their company. Young William well remembered the older men discussing applicants and rejecting some of them because they did not have the required amount of bacon, cornmeal, brown sugar and other supplies, their firearms and ammunition were not up to the standard requirement, or their wagons and oxen

were not reliable enough to make the trip across the plains. Another factor in deciding who was accepted or rejected was moral character, since members were expected to assist each other through thick and thin until their destination was reached.⁶⁹

Nearing age ten when he crossed the plains to the Willamette Valley, Barnet Simpson noted that his train rarely had the same number of wagons in it two days in a row. Some of the party would straggle and drop back with another train, or hurry up to get ahead. He seemed baffled that members of his company constantly conjectured that the train ahead of or in back of them might have more considerate and congenial people.⁷⁰ Children naturally had to abide by the decisions of their parents, usually fathers, when leaving or joining another company. Harriet Loughary, an 1864 emigrant from Burlington, Iowa, noted that just as her train prepared to camp at a beautiful mountain stream, a man, his wife and three children came rushing into their encampment. The exhausted man inquired about joining the Loughary's train, saying that he had pulled out of his train, some ten miles back and drove all day alone to avoid pursuing Indians. He revealed that he was A.D.P. Wingate, a Baptist missionary sent out by the American Mission Board to minister in Oregon, and that the Good Lord had brought him through the dangers. Pitying his wife and children, but assuming that the truth was that he had become dissatisfied with his own train, Harriet Loughary wrote, "I looked at his crying wife and children, his steaming and jaded horses, and a large whip in his hands, and doubted if the Lord had much to do in that case." The Baptist family decided to travel with this new train, and Loughary continued to comment on Wingate's behavior, noting that this father of small children "did not trust in the Lord" to take him through the most demanding stages of his journey.⁷¹

Perhaps the most extreme case of young children shifting from one train to another, and thereby being denied the chance to bond with a traveling community, was the family of Eliza Ann Brooks. In 1850, Eliza's husband caught the "gold fever," leaving his wife, five young sons and a thirteen-year-old daughter to go to California. With only two weeks warning after receiving a subsequent letter from her husband requesting that they join him, Eliza and her six children set out from Michigan for California. Shortly after ferrying over the Missouri River, the family fell in with a company which loaned them a man to drive their team. Before long this teamster became abusive, and following his participation in a drunken brawl, she released the worthless man, preferring to take her chances by traveling independently in relative isolation. With her young sons driving their team, Eliza and the children resorted to traveling alone or periodically with any nearby company that would temporarily accept them.⁷²

The many delays experienced by the Brooks family had thrown them to the rear of the emigration season when grazing lands were bare, and consequently their cattle became weakened. In an effort to camp with other overlanders, Elisha recalled that, "once in a while, a belated train would overtake us and we would whip up to travel in their company until our weary team would totter so far in the rear that their wagons would fade away in the sunset."⁷³ Strangers frequently shared water and food, but their supplies were inadequate to sustain these acts of generosity. And, despite the children's ingrained fear of Indians, it was a hunting band of Crow Indians near the Sweetwater River who traveled with and protected this single mother for more than a week, marching in front of and flanking the wagon by day, and erecting their camp nearby at night. Though lacking the security and benefits of group travel, the Brooks

family was eventually reunited with their father, completing what must have been one of the most difficult journeys of the migration.⁷⁴

For Mormon children, preparations and organizations of companies were for the most part planned by the Church, and emigrants remained protective of the slowest and oldest members of the group. During the mid-1850s, the Mormon Church secured passage of impoverished believers from England and provided crude but inexpensive handcarts which many men, women and children pushed and pulled over one thousand miles from Council Bluffs to Salt Lake City. Thirteen-year-old John Oborn, the youngest son of parents who had joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Bath, England was one of the children who participated in a Mormon handcart expedition. In 1856, all of his family's possessions were sold for cash and this money was turned over to the Perpetual Emigration Fund, a communal resource which provided Saints with a way to reach their destination in return for subsequent contributions to other emigrants who would follow in later years. After arriving in Iowa, the Oborn family was assigned to the handcart company of James G. Willie, a train which consisted of 120 handcarts, and 600 men, women, and children. The handcarts, poorly constructed and heavily loaded, averaged only about ten miles per day. Willie's company left Iowa City on July 15, too late in the year to safely begin a journey, which resulted in incredible hardships to all members. Many of the company did not survive, including John Oborn's father, who was buried near the Green River in Wyoming. "I never shall forget the testimony and the wonderful spirit of sincerity and loyalty of all members of our company," John recounted later in his life.⁷⁵

Mormons, preferring to separate themselves from potential tormentors, relied on each other and worked as a unit throughout their journey. The few Gentiles who

traveled with them, although tolerated, were treated like outsiders, as was the case with Kate Nye-Starr, her husband, and an orphan child who had been given to them a few months before their 1862 embarkation on the trail. Kate was the sister of the governor of Nevada and she made the trip across the plains to visit him in Carson City, thus making it necessary to travel through Salt Lake City. Having departed Buffalo, New York by steamship bound for Chicago where the Starrs picked up the little girl, the family arrived in Council Bluffs, staying eleven days, long enough to purchase a team of mules and a canvas-covered wagon to haul provisions. Their traveling wagon, referred to by Kate as the “ambulance,” was shipped by the Rock Island Railroad as far as the western terminus at Brooklyn, Iowa. At a hotel in Council Bluffs, Kate met a Mormon woman, Mrs. Hood, who was concerned about the Starrs going on without a company, and who felt they were in danger while traveling alone. Six miles outside Omaha, Hood persuaded the Starrs to join the Mormon group. After being approved by one of the twelve apostles in the Mormon camp, the Starrs were guaranteed their safety through to Salt Lake City, but the captain of the train warned them to expect resentment because of the relative grandeur of their wagons and supplies. Because of their unique circumstance, the Starrs’ newly adopted ten-year-old daughter had to adjust not only to her new parents, but also to an environment in which people viewed her as different and practiced a religion that was foreign to her way of life. Yet, the child remained cheerful and well-adjusted throughout the length of the journey.⁷⁶

While the Mormons maintained the best tradition of social equality on the trail, class distinctions generally blurred for most parties under the rigors of trail conditions. A hierarchy existed within some companies, and, in many cases, the way adults perceived themselves affected the way their children thought and acted on the trails.

Although breeding and heredity contributed to a family's social position, the principal distinction of class lines on the emigrant trails was one of property. Most often, a man's social status was determined by the size and quality of his outfit.⁷⁷ Martha Hill was eighteen-years-old in 1852 when her father decided to trade the rich scenery of the Cumberlands and Smokies in Tennessee for the Rogue River Valley which he had seen two years earlier during a trip to Oregon and California. The Hills were considered to have something approaching a small fortune, bringing with them over 100 heifers and several milk cows in their march across the continent. Martha's mother was also a distant cousin of both Robert E. Lee, who was destined to become the Confederate's most celebrated general, and Joseph Lane, first governor of the Oregon Territory. Together with her two younger sisters, Martha frequently walked well ahead of the wagons, purposefully avoiding contact with other members of the train. Writing later in her life Martha noted: "We were Southern born and bred and we did not consider it in good taste to speak without being introduced. We did not even speak to the man who worked for father. I know now that I was a very snobbish person for I felt myself very much superior to anyone in our party except my own family."⁷⁸

Lydia Milner Waters, whose 1855 emigrant train was mostly composed of families, also spoke of a situation in which some members felt superior to their associates. Ten wagons had horses only, which to many enigrants were a sign of wealth, and consequently those families behaved like they were "aristocracy," and they did not conform to the rules of the train. After finding it too slow to travel in a train with oxen, this disagreeable contingent went ahead, expecting to "gallop" to California.⁷⁹ Traveling with her two young children, Mary Variel was incensed at the

treatment she and her two young children received at the hands of other women after departing their steamship in St. Joseph. At the landing, a family like the Variels, who had not prepared their wagons in their hometowns, had to check off freight, collect their possessions, and locate and load wagons. Josiah and Mary Variel complained that during this time of preparation the emigrants from their hometown of Harmony, Indiana treated them not only in a “disrespectful manner” but oftentimes with “open insult.” The kindest and most helpful people were emigrants from other companies, people who owed them nothing. “During all this time my family had to remain on the bank in the hot sun and dirt, and no one offered my wife a place in their wagon, nor even spoke to her, except to quarrel with her for things she could not help,” noted Josiah Variel.⁸⁰

In addition to being categorized according to social or economic status, families were also defined by their ethnic origin, and, on many occasions, children noticed these distinctions. In American towns of the Mississippi River Valley it was common for people emigrating from Europe or from the eastern states to reside in ethnic enclaves within their larger community. Children were accustomed to being identified by their ethnicity in their home towns, but on the trails it sometimes created friction. Traveling with the Donner-Reed Party, twelve-year-old Leanna Donner noted that a destructive spirit of clannishness emerged because “the party was composed of different nationalities, Germans, Irish, Americans . . . the clans worked together when they absolutely had to but there was a great deal of unnecessary trouble, confusion and jealousy when they would meet at the campfire mornings and evenings.”⁸¹ After completing his 1997 study of the Donner Tragedy, author Frank Mullen, Jr. wrote, “They made mistakes, the biggest one was allowing the differences

of class and race and national origin to keep them apart.”⁸²

Many wagon owners were prosperous farmers, and with them frequently traveled a hired teamster or an occasional hired girl to help with washing, cooking and child care. Some young people looked for passage west at any one of the outfitting towns by offering these types of services to overlanders with families. In 1852, Lodisa Frizzel spoke of a poorly clad boy of about twelve-years-old who came to her tent while she was washing clothes in preparation for starting west. After asking him several questions, Lodisa learned that the child had run away from his home in the eastern part of Ohio, moving from one steamboat to another until reaching St. Joseph, where his goal was to find a train bound for California. She gave the homeless youth something to eat, advised him to return to his parents, and denied him an opportunity to travel with her company. Where he went from there she was not sure, but she strongly suspected that this was not the first time the lone youngster had approached prospective emigrants for passage.⁸³ This twelve-year-old boy was one of many runaways lurking in Independence, St. Joseph and Council Bluffs during the spring of an emigration year, hoping to find a way west and a new start in life. In his study of childhood on the western frontier, historian Elliot West asserted that, in some ways, “runaways epitomized the West’s threat to the future. Their stories illustrated how the frontier’s stresses, its ever-moving population, and its independence and opportunities pulled some families apart.”⁸⁴

Many older teenagers, especially males who were adept at handling cattle, were successful in securing a way west with traveling families, and younger children were often fascinated by these new people who entered their lives during this adventurous time. Ten-year-old Orson Stearns remembered a man by the name of

William Brannan who came to his father and offered to drive the baggage wagon across the plains in return for his board. Brannan brought along a large heavy trunk, and, as Orson noted, his father did not have time to inquire about the character of the man nor his baggage. David Stearns, Orson's father, was not a suspicious man, but the younger children of the train soon came to believe something was wrong with the stranger. The young hired teamster, who constantly wore a belt with a sheath knife and a six-shooter, never allowed children around his wagon, and he closely guarded his cherished trunk. While in camp one evening, some of the children peered into his wagon when he had the trunk open and they glimpsed articles of jewelry and silk. Upon discovering their presence, Brannan slammed the trunk shut, and, as Orson observed, "started as though to do them bodily harm, meanwhile cursing and reviling them for coming around."⁸⁵ A violent fight with Orson's uncle, Samuel Stearns, resulted in William Brannan's dismissal from the company which was a relief to everyone. He went on to join a train from Arkansas in which Orson said he knew several of the girls, one of whom later wore the man's jewelry.⁸⁶

Traveling with the 1846 company of Captain Josiah Morin was Lucinda Jane Saunders, who tended to the three young children of the Jacob Hoppe family. Lucinda, described as a "husky servant girl" by emigrant Heinrich Lienhard, added considerable excitement to the party. She was a person who had a sinister way of attracting attention to herself, thus providing a poor example of lady-like behavior to the Hoppe children. Although she performed her chores of cooking, washing and child care, the youthful Lucinda was a "thorn in the flesh of respectability." The young unattached men of the company, including Lienhard, feared the "man-crazy" girl and refused to have anything to do with her long before journey's end. Eventually, the Hoppes

released Lucinda from her employment responsibilities and an argument followed as to who would take in this incorrigible girl. The emigrant farmer who finally agreed to accept the challenge of Lucinda became so outraged by her conduct that he collected her few possessions and threw her out of his wagon in the middle of the desert. As Lucinda took up her bundle and wept, another family again reluctantly agreed to assume responsibility for her rather than leave her stranded in unfamiliar land with almost no chance for survival.⁸⁷

Even though the emigrant trails had their share of delinquents, most unattached children and teenagers successfully made their way west, and many of them became prominent members of their new frontier communities. “If these children defied parental authority,” asserted Elliot West, “they also embraced many of Victorian America’s most hallowed values, among them ambition, willingness to work, honesty, and self-reliance.”⁸⁸ Whether children traveled with their families in a well-outfitted company, or made their way west working for others, most expressed a feeling of entering a new and challenging stage of their lives. Children had the sense that they were leaving civilization as they knew it when they left their hometowns. The grief of saying goodbye, the agony of parting forever, the dangers, the immense distance, and the unmitigated hardships contributed to the perceptions of children who were a part of the great migration. Like adults, children felt their lives were ending and beginning at the same time. The ambiguity of these early perceptions would inevitably give way to new realities as children and their parents pushed on mile after mile and accumulated a seeming lifetime of experiences wrapped into a four-to-six month journey. Reflecting on her 1859 journey to Salt Lake City, sixteen-year-old Fanny Fry probably spoke for most young people when she wrote, “I could not describe my

feelings while these preparations were going on. It seemed that I was in a complete daze or dream from which I expected to awaken and find it all a delusion.”⁸⁹



FIGURE 1

ENTRANCE TO KANESVILLE/COUNCIL BLUFFS IN 1853

In 1853, Kaneshville was officially changed to Council Bluffs, Iowa. The town, located on the Missouri River, began as a Mormon way station and became the jumping-off place of choice for emigrants.



FIGURE 2

Kanesville Ferry and Group of Cottonwood Trees on Missouri River

During peak migration years emigrants often had to wait for several weeks to be ferried across the Missouri River.

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CHAPTER TWO

TRAVELS AND TRAVAILS

Young Emigrants Endure Exceptional Burdens on the Overland Trails

**We resorted to eating anything that could
be chewed, even bark and leaves of trees.
We youngsters ate the rawhide from our
boots. This seemed to sustain life.¹**

— John Oborn: age thirteen at the time of his journey

In 1849, J. Goldsborough Bruff, captain of a group of gold seekers and government appointees called “The Washington City and California Gold Mining Association,” departed on a government mission bound for Sacramento, California. By October 21st, the party had reached the western outpost of the Sierra Nevadas, barely thirty-five miles from the Sacramento River. Facing poor roads and deep snow, Bruff sent his men ahead while he remained behind to guard the wagons and government property until they could be retrieved. At this ridge on the Lassen Trail, near present Tehama County, California, Bruff spent many weary weeks recording the condition of and providing relief for California-bound emigrants who passed through what became known as Bruff’s Camp. One of those memorable encounters was a six-year-old boy named Billy who told Bruff that he longed for his home in Burlington, Iowa. There, “we had as nice a house as you ever saw . . . we had a nice yard, and plum trees, and peaches, and gooseberries, and we could go a little ways and get blackberries and grapes and all them things . . . Oh, how I miss em!” Billy, along with his family, had found a welcome reprieve at the camp, but he did not look forward to the prospect of

living in a tent with other gold-seekers at the diggings, and he hoped it would not be long before his father would collect enough gold for the family to return to Iowa.²

Less than a week after Billy's arrival at Bruff's Camp in November, late in the season for travel through the heavy pine timber country of the Sierra Nevadas, the beleaguered Ferguson and Alford families saw lights in the distance. Eleven-year-old Henry Ferguson described his father as "yelling like a western Indian" with pleasure as the family neared the relative safety of Bruff's Camp. After nearly seven months of demanding travel, Henry wrote that the teams of animals were "tired, poor and jaded," and the family was "worn and discouraged," ready to return home.³ Thoughts of home similarly consumed the mind of eighteen-year-old Martha Hill throughout her 1853 journey to the Pacific Northwest. When her wagon train was only fifty miles from its destination of Oregon City, she overheard a man offer her father ten thousand dollars for the livestock he had driven to Oregon. Martha pleaded with her father to accept the money and then take the family back home to Tennessee, "for I was so homesick that I would have started back that very night if father had been willing."⁴

For pioneer families, many of whom were farmers with no plains or mountain experience, the road west was filled with hardships. Indeed, if these emigrants had known what lay ahead of them, many would never have begun the journey at all. Poor roads, harsh weather, stampedes, dangerous river crossings, hunger, thirst, accidents, and sickness and death were challenges for emigrants of all ages. Despite efforts of some overly protective parents, it was impossible to shelter children from the inevitable hazards of a rigorous overland journey. If they survived their months on the trail, and arrived healthy, these young people ultimately could draw strength from their sufferings and use their experiences to better adjust to the hardships that they

would inevitably face in the establishment of new frontier homes. Instead of being mere observers of the westering process, children were vital participants, and their numbers were considerable. Estimates indicate that during 1849 alone, over 1,500 children traveled with their parents to the California gold fields. Similar numbers advanced northward to Oregon or joined the Mormon settlements that radiated out of the Salt Lake Valley.⁵

The California, Oregon, and Mormon trails closely approximated each other for more than half of the trip by following the course of the Platte River, then turning southward through South Pass, and along the Sweetwater River in Wyoming. Until emigrants came to the Raft River, a tributary flowing south of the Snake River, and the last point at which they parted ways according to their final destinations, children on the California and Oregon trails shared common experiences and hardships. At that point, however, many of their stories became unique to the specific trail that each followed. For those persons traveling to California, crossing the Humboldt Desert and traversing the Sierra Nevada Mountains presented the most difficult challenges. For Oregon-bound travelers, the treacherous rapids and falls of the Snake and Columbia rivers, or the difficult journey around Mount Hood in Oregon via the Barlow Road posed the greatest threats. And, for Mormon travelers, even though their shorter trek ended in Utah, they too had to cross the arid plains of southwestern Wyoming and descend the rugged Wasatch Mountains.

During the early 1840s, before gold was discovered in California and before Oregon Fever had gripped the nation, many prospective emigrants were weighing the benefits of traveling west. They were first and foremost concerned about the kinds of conditions they would find along the relatively unimproved trails that carried them

into *terra incognita*. Many potential overlanders looked to newspapers for reports on the feasibility of a cross-country journey, especially with regard to road conditions. They were encouraged by articles such as one that appeared in the Missouri Republican on May 5, 1846 which reported, “that a very good road was discovered and traveled by a small party of emigrants who left Missouri in 1844.”⁶ This was the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party who proved that there was a viable wagon route into California just one year after the Applegate train had opened up the southern route into Oregon. Although the news was encouraging about these California-bound emigrants who made it to the Sacramento Valley without one death, their journey was not uniformly easy. These early pioneers made excellent time across the plains of Nebraska and they reached Fort Laramie by June 20, 1844. But to maintain such a rapid pace, the sixteen children of the party had to endure many miles of walking over primitive roads that were recurrently slippery and muddy, followed by periods of dry and dusty conditions.⁷

From the inception of their journeys west, both children and parents repeatedly referred to road conditions and weather as having a direct impact on the progress of each day. The first leg of the trek, despite the relatively flat terrain, was still physically demanding. While traveling along the Platte River Valley in 1849, eighteen-year-old Joseph Henry Merrill wrote that, “we could see nothing but one blue sky and the rolling plain, no tree, no shrub, no little streams, nothing . . . the roads today were quite heavy; to drive long drives as we have been forced to.”⁸ His description reflected what many young emigrants must have felt once they crossed the Missouri River and “left civilization.”

On the plains, road conditions were, for the most part, determined by the

weather. If travel was relatively smooth, animals fared better, food was served on time, children complained less, and families were more congenial. After heavy rains, roads frequently became a continual string of mud holes, requiring every possible hand to assist with moving the wagons. Travel was easier when conditions were dry, unless it was windy, according to Jane Gould, an 1862 overlander and mother of two young boys. On a hot and windy day in August, she wrote that, “the wind blew in our faces in the afternoon and nearly suffocated us with dust, the dust is worse than Indians, storms, mosquitoes, or even woodticks.”⁹ Menacing winds notably affected travel when emigrants reached the drier regions of western Nebraska. “The roads today were as bad as yesterday—sand, sand, sand. Will we ever get through it? And the wind is blowing a perfect hurricane,” wrote Flora Isabelle Bender, fifteen-years-old in 1863.¹⁰ Of a similar mindset was Helen Carpenter who noted, “the dust and wind made everyone’s lips sore, causing them to ache, swell, crack open and bleed.” Helen’s sixteen-year-old sister, Emily, was equally frustrated with windy weather when her long skirt prevented free movement over wind-blown and dusty roads. To prevent it from swirling about, she pinned rocks in the hem of the burdensome garment, only to have to contend with bruised shins for the duration of the week.¹¹

Whether it was strong winds, intense heat, severe cold, or frequent thunderstorms, harsh weather produced high levels of anxiety and suffering for all overlanders. But for children, many of whom were thinly clothed and unprepared for the sudden changes of temperature and violent storms, it was an especially taxing experience. In March 1852, the family of thirteen-year-old Al Hawk departed from their home in Indiana and headed for Oregon. During the first part of their journey they encountered extreme cold and snowstorms, making the roads icy and muddy. By

the end of their trip, the six Hawk boys, along with their mother, were forced to walk for weeks in the grueling hot sun. This was especially tiresome and difficult for the younger boys who had to relinquish their space in the wagon for their sick father. Young Al admired his mother for not complaining, and the children were inspired to follow her example. In order to get some relief from the intolerable heat and blinding sun, Hawk recalled, “we would all get behind the wagon and hold on; the wagon cover would give us some protection from the hot sun.”¹²

When children suffered from bitterly cold conditions, it especially affected their legs, feet and hands. In 1853, Joel Knight, his pregnant wife, Amelia, and their seven children sold their farm in Iowa and headed west for what they hoped would be a more prosperous life in Oregon. Not one week of their journey had passed before two-year-old Chatfield Knight suffered terribly from the pain of sore and cold feet. It was heartwrenching for his mother to hear him cry, and must have been a rude awakening for all members of the Knight family who were suddenly faced with the realization that this was only the beginning of the hardships that lay ahead. In one of her first diary entries on April 14th, Amelia despairingly wrote that these were “dreary times, wet and muddy, and crowded in the tent, cold and wet and uncomfortable in the wagon, no place for the poor children.”¹³

If children trudged through mud and snow during the daytime, their clothes became wet and often froze on their bodies at night. Because they began their journeys late in the season, many of the children who traveled with the Mormon Handcart companies in 1856 were especially susceptible to exposure from the cold. Traveling with the John Hunt Company, Mary Goble described the year as being “so cold that clumps of ice floated down the shallow Platte River.” While encamped near the river,

the thirteen-year-old, in an effort to secure fresh drinking water for her pregnant mother, set out for a nearby spring. Forced to wade through snow, she became confused, lost her way, and subsequently suffered excruciating pain in her legs and feet due to the extreme cold weather. Some men from the company finally found her, but not before her feet and legs were frozen. The rescuers carried the young girl to camp, rubbed her legs in snow, and placed her feet in a bucket of water. “The pain was terrible,” remembered Mary, “The frost came out of my legs and feet but not out of my toes.”¹⁴ Ten-year-old Ellen Purcell and her fourteen-year-old sister Maggie who traveled with the 1856 Mormon handcart company of Edward Martin also suffered terribly from badly frozen feet and legs. It was especially traumatic for these two girls since both of their parents had died during the journey. When, in November 1856, a relief party met the Martin Company, the girls were in desperate need of dry clothing. A member of the rescue party noted that, “when shoes and stockings were removed from the girls’ feet, the skin on their legs and feet came off. Maggie’s legs were frozen but salvageable, and her skin was scraped from the bones. Ellen’s legs, however, were so badly frozen that nothing could be done for her, requiring them to be amputated just below the knees.”¹⁵

Accompanying the extreme heat and cold were violent thunderstorms that commonly occurred without warning, and emigrants found little protection in their fragile tents and wagon covers. Storms were especially frequent on the plains during spring and early summer, and when parents sensed threatening weather, they hurriedly scrambled to find their children. “Unless you have been through it,” remembered Benjamin Franklin Bonney, “you have no idea of the confusion resulting from a storm on the plains.”¹⁶ For children who did live through the experience, it was one that most

never forgot. Mary Elizabeth Munkers celebrated her tenth birthday on April 8, 1846, the day she departed Tennessee for Oregon with her parents and eight brothers and sisters. Enduring fierce storms in which terrific winds blew the covers off the wagons and overturned tents was not easy. Recounted Mary, “the sky would be black as ink one moment, and then there would be a brilliant flash of lightning, which made it instantly seem like daylight. . . . The rain came down in bucketfuls, drenching us to the skin . . . there wasn’t a tent in camp that held against the terrific wind.”¹⁷ Even if one was fortunate enough to make it to a wagon during heavy rains, the wagon box was crowded, and children had to sleep in wet beds, wear wet clothes, and frequently went to bed hungry.

In 1853, fifteen-year-old Rachel Taylor stood at the opening of her tent when a fierce storm broke with all its ferocity. On August 28th she wrote: “we did not have time to escape, but shared in the general overthrow and were rolled some distance enveloped in the folds of the tent before we could regain our footing.”¹⁸ Still, Rachel survived without injury. Not so lucky were some of the members of the Ferguson and Alford families who were killed during a frightful storm that struck Bruff’s Camp on October 31, 1849. Eleven-year-old Henry Ferguson recounted that “about midnight, in gloomy darkness, the storm broke upon us in all its fury, and breaking off near the ground the great black oak tree under which our tents and the tents of our friend Alford were stretched. The body of the tree fell across our tent in which there were four young children, and the top of the tree fell on the Alford tent, killing the old man and his oldest son instantly, and fatally injuring his younger son and their hired man, a Mr. Cameron, who both died the next day.”¹⁹ For J. Goldsborough Bruff, who was awakened when he had heard the screams of several persons, it was a shocking sight.

The men raised the blood-stained tent and spent the remainder of the day attending to the injured and burying the dead. Bruff wrote that the women and children “stood, with clasped hands, choking sobs, and eyes upraised to Heaven, regardless of the bleak storm and rain.”²⁰

Fierce storms also meant that lightning was a probability and nothing was more frightening for young emigrants than being in a flimsy wagon or tent when the sky exploded with light. No sooner had the Saunders family crossed the Missouri River in 1847 than a terrific storm broke out over a densely treed area. A twelve-year-old boy in the company was struck and killed by lightning, and it was viewed as an ominous omen for the travelers to bury someone so young and so soon into the journey, according to Mary Saunders.²¹ When William Colvig journeyed west in 1861, he too remembered one of the most frightening moments he experienced on the plains as being caused by lightning. According to the sixteen-year-old, a blinding bolt of lightning struck a wagon that contained a barrel of gunpowder, causing the wagon bed to explode instantly. The sound was deafening, and the contents of the wagon were spread across the prairie.²² Likewise, Mary Ellen Todd, aged nine in 1852, remembered the constant threat of storms, and was all too aware of the fact that she had no house for protection. One storm was exceptionally alarming when the torrential downfall of rain and hail was accompanied by rolling thunder and lightning that seemed to shake the ground. All stood in awe when lightning suddenly struck a wagon wheel of a wagon belonging to a family whom the Todds were traveling with, and swirled around it for several seconds. For that short time, described Mary Ellen, the wheel literally looked like a ball of fire, and sent chills through the bodies of everyone who witnessed the extraordinary vision.²³

Lightning also caused draft animals to become panicky, and, in some cases, triggered one of the most fearful and dangerous events of westward travel—the stampede. If the cry of stampede was heard in a company, every man was frantically on his feet, unhitching oxen and chaining them to the wagon wheels, while the women and older children rushed, sometimes in vain, to gather the smaller children and get them safely into the wagons. When the danger was over, it was a relief to know that missing children had been found safely in other wagons.

During the 1840s and early 1850s, vast buffalo herds roamed west of Fort Kearny, and they posed a different kind of threat for creation of a stampede. At their approach, oxen, mules and horses sometimes stampeded while still in their harnesses. Unless the course of a buffalo stampede was deflected, every person or animal outside the protected area of encircled wagons was at risk. If there was time, the men tried to shoot the leader of the herd, hoping that the stampeding buffalo would divide and scatter. Many young people spoke of horrifying scenes such as the one described by John Braly who was twelve when he traveled west in 1847, a year in which emigrants frequently reported seeing hundreds of buffalo on the plains. Excitement prevailed among the emigrants in his company when, like a freight train, a herd of charging buffalo headed straight for his camp. He was not sure that he would live through the stampede, especially at the moment when one of the enormous animals came so close to his wagon that it jumped over the wagon tongue.²⁴ A year later, when faced with the ferocity of a moving herd of buffalo, a boy traveling with Margaret Hecox refused to be intimidated. Emboldened, he seized a whip and proceeded to lash a large bull in the face. The child was quickly rescued by his mother, according to Margaret, or his impetuosity would have most likely ended in disaster.²⁵

Inescapably, along with close calls also went death. On August 3, 1862, the family of Albert Gould passed by a train that had just buried a young woman and her baby. Jane Gould, chronicler of their journey, was saddened when she learned that the mother had been killed after being run over by cattle and wagons during a stampede on the previous day. Gould wrote: “She gave birth to a child a short time before she died, the child was buried with her. She leaves a little two-year-old girl and a husband, they say he is nearly crazy with sorrow.”²⁶

Although not as common as stampedes which involved buffalo, there were also cases in which the livestock of a train began to stampede for unknown reasons. For 1857 overland traveler Sarah Maria Mousely, July 27th was the most painful day of her journey, “a wild scene.” One moment the cattle in the train were calm and in another instant they began to move all together. The fright on her father’s face left an indelible memory. Men and women leapt from their wagons while children screamed, watching team after team run wild on the open prairie. Sarah witnessed two of her sisters, Nellie and Wilhelmina or “Willie,” jump from their wagon, not knowing what else to do. Both girls suffered acute injuries. Willie’s face and chest had been trampled on during the chaos and “she was streaming with blood and crying for help,” wrote Sarah.²⁷ The emigrants, filled with anxiety, were compelled to remain the day in camp, nursing the injured members of the company. The following day they were visited by Indians who sympathized with their plight and remained through the night keeping a vigil for the sisters who were fortunate to survive the catastrophe.²⁸

Tragedy and narrow escapes were also unavoidable when emigrants crossed the countless rivers and streams that dotted the western landscape. The task of fording or ferrying wagons across rivers required patience and skill, and many farmer-

emigrants quickly learned that they lacked such expertise. Some older children reacted quickly if they found themselves in a life-threatening situation during a river crossing, while younger children either depended on adults for safety, or were simply left to blind fate. The anticipation of possible disaster was almost worse than the actual crossing, remembered eight-year-old Elizabeth Lord. Terror gripped the minds of overlanders, and the air was thick with reports of accidents that had resulted from quicksand, undercurrents, upset wagons or drownings, all of which, sensed the young girl, had a tendency to make her father uneasy, despite his continual pleas for others in his company not to panic.²⁹

If emigrants were willing to pay, wagons, and sometimes cattle, could be ferried across rivers in primitive flat-bottomed boats. Horses, however, had to be ridden or led across rivers and streams, and, in deep water, they frequently became frightened and disoriented. The boys and men who performed this difficult task directed the horse across the river by using a willow stick and holding tightly to the mane. It was dangerous duty, and those who accepted the responsibility knew that they were at considerable risk. In 1853, when he was nine-years-old, David Longmire and his family left Indiana for Washington Territory. For him, one of the most threatening incidents of the journey occurred at one of the numerous stream crossings on the plains. A young teenager named Van Ogle rode the lead horse across a stream when the animal suddenly reared up and threw him backwards. David was in awe of Van Ogle's rare presence of mind as he dived to the bottom of the stream to avoid contact with the panicked horse. To the relief of all, he reappeared on the surface of the water, and David's admiration for his friend and fellow traveler continued for the remainder of their lives.³⁰

The men who were not in charge of the livestock usually swam alongside the wagons, steadying the wagon beds and reassuring frightened members of the party. Though only five-years-old in 1848, Inez Parker recalled how serious her father looked while swimming along their wagon as they crossed the Platte River. He soberly warned her and the other children to remain motionless in order to maintain the balance of the wagon. It was a tall order for the children who screamed and covered their faces when the water rose within a few inches of the edge of the wagons.³¹ After her train had successfully crossed Platte River in 1856, Helen Carpenter wrote that, “the water runs very swiftly and that together with the sand washing from under the wheels or the wheels settling down into the quicksand, caused a shaking trembling sensation that was truly terrifying.”³²

Most emigrants safely reached the opposite shores of the rivers and streams, but there were many unfortunates who drowned, and others who barely escaped the traumatic ordeal. If a family was in trouble, it could generally count on other emigrants for help, but such was not the case with a family trying to cross the Platte River the same day that Josiah and Mary Variel did in 1851. The river was broad and shallow, and the men were advised to use blocks to build up their wagons so that the contents would remain dry, and so that women and children could ride in the wagon box. Mary remembered being dismayed by the fact that some of the men had chosen to use buffalo skulls for support rather than taking the extra time to build up their wagons with blocks. She also thought that her wagon was the last to cross that day until she heard a voice behind her calling out for help. Looking back, Mary saw a man, woman and two children in a two-horse, light wagon. One of the horses was struggling terribly, and the owner had screamed that he would pay well for assistance. The

captain of the Variel train refused the service of any oxen from his company to help the stranded family pull its wagon out of the river, thus leaving them to an unsure fate. The experience was particularly unsettling for Mary who never knew what became of the struggling family. The cries of the woman and children and the swearing of the man, as they disappeared in the current, haunted her for the rest of her life.³³

Incidents like the one witnessed by Mary Variel on the Platte also occurred when people crossed the Green River in Wyoming. It was far deeper than the Platte River, and possessed a stronger current. Here, as with several other locations, emigrants often refused to pay the exorbitant prices that were charged by ferry-owners, or they simply refused to wait in the long lines for their turn. When families attempted to cross certain of these large rivers without assistance, the results were often disastrous. In 1852, a man decided to ford the Green River with his two children rather than pay for the ferry. The current was so strong that the wagon floated off its wheels. One of his daughters, age twelve at the time, saved herself and her two-year-old sister by gripping the bow of the wagon and holding the younger girl above water until they were rescued more than a mile downstream.³⁴ Although only four-years-old in 1857, Nancy Lowell Campbell vividly remembered a similar event when a member of her company refused to build up his wagon in preparation for crossing the Green River. Midstream, the wagon floated boat-like off its wheels and was swept away by the current. Fortunately, the heroic efforts of fellow travelers saved the lives of the panicked family.³⁵

Equally challenged were members of the Mormon handcart expeditions of the 1850s who had the added burden of pulling and pushing their carts across the rivers and streams. Women and older children were crucial to the success of these

companies, and in many cases they muscled their handcarts to Salt Lake City without any adult male assistance. When Edward Martin's handcart company reached the point where they chose to cross the Platte River, they were still 700 miles from Salt Lake City. Josiah Rogerson, Sr., a member of the 1856 company wrote that "never was a more soul-stirring sight that the party and passage of this company over that river. Several of the carts were drawn entirely by women, yet their hearts were glad and full of hope."³⁶ After their father had died in September that year, eighteen-year-old Patience Loader and her sisters came close to drowning while pulling their cart across the freezing waters of the Platte River. Their mother watched in horror as her daughters struggled for survival. Patience could hear her mother screaming from the bank, "For God's sake some of you men help my poor girls!"³⁷

Both the Martin and Willie handcart companies unwisely started their journeys late in the season, and these emigrants were already in a deplorable condition even before they attempted to cross the Platte River. All of them had to roll up their trousers and skirts to wade the cold river, often slipping off boulders and stones into deeper water. In many places, the water was nearly waist deep, and blocks of snow and ice had to be avoided with each step. Psychological pressures mounted, and some of the Saints who had anticipated soon arriving in their wilderness Zion wondered if Brigham Young's relief parties would arrive before the entire party perished.³⁸ Earlier in their journey, Edward Martin had issued an order for emigrants to reduce the weight of their handcarts. Because of this advice, the blankets, bedding and warm clothing that were needed after the frigid river crossings were gone, thus contributing further to the death toll of the company. Parents pushed and pulled their handcarts until their strength was drained. The young children of Aaron Jackson saw their debilitated father

collapse mid-stream while pulling his handcart. During the night he died, and the children helped their mother wrap his frozen body in a blanket for burial in the snow.³⁹

For overlanders traveling northwest to Oregon, the canyon of the Snake River and the dangerous one-hundred-fourteen mile float down the Columbia River presented more hardships than any other part of the route to the Willamette Valley. After nearly five months on the road, emigrants were exhausted, their oxen weakened, and their seemingly limitless patience tested by the rugged hills and valleys of Idaho and Oregon. It would take every ounce of energy to complete the final leg of their journey. When emigrants arrived at Three-Island-Crossing on the Snake River, they had the choice of crossing the river at that point and traveling south around the bend of the river, which added considerable distance to the journey. Or, they could caulk and cover their wagon beds and float down the Snake River for two hundred miles to Fort Boise while driving their teams along the river's bank.

The water route was tempting and deceptive to tired travelers who thought it would be a relief from the dusty roads. Initially, the Snake River current moved slowly, and the going seemed pleasant. But those who chose the voyage by river often lost every possession, and some lost their lives. Indians and other settlers warned emigrants not to attempt the Snake River by water because of the rapids and treacherous falls further down the canyon. Edward J. Allen, who operated a ferry across the Snake River at Fort Boise, wrote that emigrants could expect to encounter "a series of rapids and falls which shot the craft along at breath-taking speed . . . the rude crafts were catapulted over the cascades without warning, missing rocks by inches."⁴⁰ When Allen made his first trip down the Snake River, he traveled with another man, his wife and two small children, about whom he wrote "narrowly missed

death many times.”⁴¹

Still, many emigrant families opted to take what they erroneously thought was the fastest and shortest route. “What a glorious change it would be, and the idea was hailed with delight, we bit like fish,” recounted Al Hawk, thirteen-years-old in 1852.⁴² His parents and five brothers, the youngest less than two-years-old, and two other families traveling with them agreed on the water route and felt they had made the right decision until the river began to narrow and the current began to rush swiftly. “All hands were at the mercy of angry waters,” noted Al, “it didn’t give us time to realize the danger we were in.”⁴³ When the travelers reached calmer waters, all families decided that the women and children would walk along the river bank. On that path they eerily passed the graves of emigrants who had lost their lives in the river, and supposedly had been buried by Indians. In many places, the older boys were required to help the men empty boats, let them down the rapids with ropes, and carry them around dangerous obstacles. Although they lost valuable time, the Hawk family made it to the fort and continued their journey to Portland. Sadly, however, Al Hawk’s mother, who endured the hardships of the journey better than anyone according to her son, died less than a year after the family had settled in Oregon. He forever attributed her death to a fall she suffered while on the treacherous Snake River.⁴⁴

When the family of Alfred and Mary Jane Washburn, pioneers of 1851, reached the Snake River, Alfred told his fourteen-year-old son Henry, a capable horseman and swimmer, to take the stock across the river where there was better pasture. The current was swift and the horse that Henry rode became frightened in the deep water. Henry tried desperately to guide his horse into shallow water, but the distraught animal reared up, threw him off, and the youth suffered a fatal blow to his

head. Along with their parents and other families in the party, the thirteen siblings of Henry Washburn remained at the site for two days and searched for his body. When their efforts failed, Mary Jane Washburn wrote a note which she fastened to a board beside the road asking anyone who might find her son's body to bury it and notify her in Portland. Henry's thirteen-year-old sister Marilla remembered how much at peace her mother was when she received a letter the following spring from another emigrant who said he had found the boy's body and buried it. In the letter was included a small horseshoe that a friend had given Henry in Chicago shortly before his departure for good luck.⁴⁵

After Oregon emigrants left the Snake River, their goal was to make it over the Blue Mountains before getting bogged down by winter snows, and into the valley of the Grande Ronde, where they enjoyed a slight reprieve before undertaking the last and most difficult part of their journey. Before 1846, all travelers rafted down the treacherous Columbia River to the Dalles. After 1846, emigrants had the choice of traveling the water route or following the newly-established Barlow Road, a land route around Mount Hood blazed by Samuel Barlow and Joel Palmer. Or, they could approach Oregon from the south on a trail opened by Jesse Applegate in 1845. The Barlow Road was extremely difficult, especially at Laurel Hill, referred to by emigrants as the "chute," on the western slopes of the Cascade Mountains. Wagons had to be lowered down the steep grade by ropes. Emigrants who chose Applegate's route traveled to Fort Hall, then into Nevada along the Humboldt River, and subsequently northwest into Oregon. The southern route, however, was hot and dry, and overlanders on the Applegate Trail reported frequent problems with Indians. Despite what was considered an exorbitant toll of five dollars per wagon and ten cents

per animal to use the Barlow Road, most emigrants considered it safer than a desert crossing or rafting down the Columbia River.⁴⁶

The Applegate brothers, Charles, Lindsay, and Jesse, were motivated to open up the southern route into the Willamette Valley so that emigrants could bring their wagons and cattle with them all the way to Oregon City, and because of their own tragic experience in descending the Columbia River in boats. Lindsay Applegate named his third son after his highly esteemed brother Jesse, and the younger Jesse was not yet seven-years-old when the families departed Missouri for their long and precedent-setting march to Oregon in 1843. Prior to their departure down the Columbia River, the men and boys spent two weeks at Fort Walla Walla building small boats, or what they referred to as skiffs, which were large enough to carry eight to ten persons. The wagons and cattle were left under the protection of the Hudson's Bay Company until the men could return and retrieve their possessions. It was also at this point that an Indian pilot was hired to navigate the families safely down the river.⁴⁷

The children were excited to commence their voyage down the great river and, in the beginning, all enjoyed the ride, especially the pleasant rocking motion of the boat. As the families proceeded further down the river, however, their boats began to sweep along at a rapid pace, and the waves became more treacherous. At this dangerous part of the river, all were expected to follow the boat that the Indian was piloting, but in an instant of confusion, one of the boats disappeared, and the men and boys in it were struggling in the water. Lindsay and the older Jesse Applegate were seized with frenzy as they watched their sons, Elisha, aged eleven, and Warren and Edward Applegate, both aged nine, fight for their lives. The men were compelled to

make a desperate attempt to save them and others, but were convinced by their wives that such an effort would result in the loss of more lives. “The words of that frantic appeal,” recalled young Jesse, “saved our boat and two families from speedy and certain destruction.”⁴⁸ Elisha Applegate swam to safety, but the two younger boys, along with seventy-year-old Andrew McClellan, perished in the disaster, and were never found. Jesse’s uncle was quick to blame the Indian pilot for the deaths of his family members, but the pilot sensed revenge, and he quickly disappeared after the boats landed. The Applegate families mourned their dead, but continued their dangerous river journey to The Dalles, and went on to considerably impact the early history of Oregon.⁴⁹

Over the course of the overland migration, drownings not only occurred at virtually every difficult river and stream crossing during the entire length of the Oregon and California trails, but also happened when emigrants went for a swim and underestimated the depth or current of a river or pond. Such was the case with seventeen-year-old Hiram Malick, one of the six children of Abigail and George Malick, Oregon emigrants of 1848. Together with some friends, Hiram went swimming in the Platte River on a pleasant summer afternoon. The current was more swift than any of the boys had realized, and Hiram began to experience leg cramps. A companion tried to swim a pole out to midstream to facilitate a rescue, but the water ran so fast that the rescuer had to return to the shore. Friends frantically urged Hiram to hold on and swim harder, but the seventeen-year-old was doomed, and he went down seven or eight times before drowning. Some party members who had witnessed his tragic death later remembered that Hiram Malick’s last distressing words were, “Oh my God, Oh Lord Jesus receive my soul for I am no more.”⁵⁰ His family was

devastated, and it took over a year for his mother to write about this tragic event. She could not imagine that in such a short time after their departure from Illinois, death would come to one of her older children, who she believed was a seasoned and experienced traveler.⁵¹

Numerous children of all ages spoke of fatal or near-fatal drownings like the one that claimed the life of Hiram Malick. After crossing the Sweetwater River, the company with which ten-year-old Barnet Simpson and eleven-year-old John Anderson traveled laid over for three days to wash clothes, repair wagons, and dry out supplies that were wet from the river crossing. The boys then decided to go swimming, and, after they had ventured too far, they discovered that the water was not as shallow as they had anticipated. John Anderson suddenly stepped into a deep hole and he screamed to Barnet for help, but both were swept downstream in the current. Finding himself washed up on a sandbar, Barnet, from a distance, saw John crawl out of the river to return to the train alone. When the two boys discovered one another at camp and realized that they were both alive, they celebrated their good fortune and, at the same time, made a solemn pact not to tell their parents about their narrow escape until they reached the Willamette Valley.⁵²

All emigrants soon learned to anticipate possible troubles at river crossings, but such was not the case with the frequent accidents that were endemic to the overland trails. After disease, accidents were the leading killers of children who traveled west. Especially frequent were the incidents of being crushed by moving wagons or from handling draft animals. Despite the continuous warnings of their parents to be careful around wagons, children of all ages were vulnerable to these types of accidents because they generally walked alongside the moving wagons in

order to lighten the load, and because the springless, cushionless wagon seats made riding uncomfortable. A sudden veering of the wagon's course or another wagon approaching along the flanks of a family's wagon often spelled potential disaster. Other children simply fell from the wagon boxes because of a sudden jolt or an untimely shifting of their position. On July 12, 1850, Mary Ann Maughan dressed her three-year-old son Peter in white and made him a coffin out of a dry goods box in preparation for his burial. That day Peter had been sitting in the front of the wagon between his brother and sister when he leaned forward to curiously look at an oxen with one horn. He lost his balance, and fell before the wheels of the wagon. The first wheel passed over him, but the second wheel stopped on his back and crushed the child to death. Peter lived barely an hour, and the Maughans, with everyone in their company gathered around them for comfort, left their young son in a grave on a hill overlooking the Platte River.⁵³

Three years before Peter Maughan died, five-year-old Robert Gardner was also buried on the banks of the Platte River. Robert was standing by the oxen of his family's wagon when one of the animals suddenly kicked him and bolted forward, knocking him under the wagon. By the afternoon on the day of the accident, Robert seemed to have recovered. In an effort to allay the fears of his family, he proceeded to play and run alongside the wagon. Later in the day, however, the young boy crawled into the wagon, never to get up again without help. His injuries were internal, and his suffering increased with each day. Robert's parents did what they could to relieve their son's pain, and his father held him for days while driving the wagon. With three other small children to care for, Robert's mother watched in agony as her small son's condition deteriorated. "He lived until he was nothing but skin and bones," wrote

Robert's uncle, "then death mercifully ended all."⁵⁴

In 1846, Nicholas Carriger was traveling with a young boy who fell under the wheels of a moving wagon. The nine-year-old suffered a crushed ankle in one leg and a broken bone in the thigh of his other leg. Inexplicably, his family laid him in the wagon without dressing the wound. The child suffered for nine days while gangrene set in and a decision had to be made about whether or not to amputate his leg.⁵⁵ The company sent for Edwin Bryant, a newspaperman who had studied medicine and was traveling behind the Carriger train. Although not a licensed doctor, Bryant reported helping many 1846 emigrants who were in need of medical assistance. After seeing that the boy's limb was "swarming with maggots," Bryant advised the mother that any attempt to save the child would be useless, and would only increase his already intolerable pain. The boy's mother, however, insisted on an amputation, and allowed a man who proclaimed that he was a surgeon's assistant to perform the task. Using a butcher knife and a crude handsaw for instruments, the man, "made an incision just below the knee and commenced sawing; but before he had completed the amputation of the bone, he concluded that the operation should be performed above the knee. . . . During these demonstrations, the boy never uttered a groan or complaint . . . the knife and saw were then applied and the limb amputated. A few drops of blood only oozed from the stump; the child was dead his miseries were over."⁵⁶

An incredible number of children fell from wagons while traveling west, but not all such accidents were fatal. If the ground was soft or sandy, a child might be fortunate enough to escape with bruises or broken bones, and live to tell about it, as was the case with Elizabeth Lord. The eight-year-old jumped from her wagon while the team of oxen was moving. Her skirt caught on the pin of the wagon wheel and

threw her under the wheels. The first wheel ran across the face of the young girl, stripping the skin off one side of her face, while the back wheel ran over her abdomen. She was badly hurt, and her parents feared her dead, but “the dust was so deep,” remembered Elizabeth, “that it softened the weight and lightened the load, all of which were in my favor.” She was up and walking in about a week, but continued to carry the scar on her face.⁵⁷

Children were also injured or killed in a myriad of other accidents that added to the hazards of cross-country travel. When Mary Furlong’s family traveled to Oregon in 1843, she was too young to remember much of her journey west. Yet, she clearly recalled how the adults worried about running out of provisions when the company left the buffalo country of the plains. The men would accordingly trade more often with the Indians, who provided dried meat and fish in exchange for clothing and other items. Mary also remembered that during one of the bartering sessions “we had a large bonfire and while they were trading the horses got frightened and started to run. He got the rope around me and threw me into the fire. Although I was taken out quickly, I was badly burned.”⁵⁸

Not so lucky was Jerry Carter Perkins who did not escape a similar accident. Like Mary Furlong, Jerry became caught in a rope that he was playing with, and he fell into the evening campfire, knocking over a large kettle of boiling water which scalded him to death.⁵⁹ Susan Westfall was also the victim of a severe scalding when she fell into one of the famous boiling Steamboat Springs in the Utah Territory during her 1857 journey. The springs were spoken about by hundreds of emigrants. In 1852, seventeen-year-old Eliza Ann McAuley described them as “boiling up in the middle of the valley forming a large stream, with a temperature of at least 170 degrees, and a

nauseous and sickening smell.”⁶⁰ Susan was in tremendous pain after the accident and was not expected to live, according fellow traveler, Arthur Menefee, yet he did not mention a subsequent death or burial.⁶¹ No doubt, carelessness added to the cause of such accidents, but many were difficult to prevent since parents were busy and fatigued, and unable to watch their children at all times.

More commonplace, however, were mishaps caused by draft animals, or by careless gun-handling, and children were at as much at risk as adults, even if they were not carrying a weapon. In 1852, Susan Angell traveled to Oregon with a company that experienced only two fatalities during their entire journey, and both of the deaths were the results of accidents, one involving a child, a small boy who became entangled in a rope that was attached to a horse. Onlookers were horrified as the horse became frightened and bolted. The child was dragged behind the run-away horse, and he died before his lifeless body could be cut loose. Somberly, the Angell company buried the boy near Fort Kearny, and his family, like so many others who had buried loved ones on the way west, had no choice but to stay on schedule and push on in grief.⁶²

Overlanders, by and large, carried a vast amount of firearms on their journeys and, in general, it could be said that they were more afraid of gun-handlers in their own trains than they were of hostile Indians. Their fears were justified as was evidenced by the steady stream of emigrants who were treated for bullet wounds at Fort Kearny and Fort Laramie hospitals, and by grave markers alongside the trail that revealed a cause of death.⁶³ Children were both victims of gunshot accidents or witnesses to such fatalities. Typical was the wounding of a young German girl who, in 1850, was struck in the neck and breast by a gun that went off in a wagon in front of her as it suddenly jolted on the rocky trail.⁶⁴ Although she had to endure days of

jolting in a wagon while in agonizing pain, she survived, but others were not so fortunate. The long trek to California made by the Ringo family in 1864 was marked by tragedy when patriarch Martin Ringo accidentally shot himself in the face and died. It was “the saddest record of my life . . . my little children are crying all the time,” wrote Mary Ringo, who, along with her five children under the age of fourteen, buried her husband.⁶⁵

When seventeen-year-old Eliza Ann McAuley’s train arrived at Boiling Springs while traveling the California Trail in Nevada on an August day in 1852, two young boys from a previous train were waiting at the site, including one who was critically injured and in a great deal of pain. Eliza Ann learned that the youths were brothers who had been out hunting when they heard what they thought was a gunshot from across the stream. Thinking the gun had been fired by Indians, one of the boys frantically jumped to his feet. He tripped on his gun which was lying on the ground. The firearm went off, and the bullet entered the young boy’s lungs. By the time the McAuley train reached the springs, nearly two hours after the accident, the boy was failing rapidly. The newly arrived company gave the brothers all of the fresh water that they had, which was all they could do to help these suffering boys until their own train could rescue them. When Eliza Ann’s wagon pulled out, the injured boy was still alive, but she did not expect that he had much of a chance of survival.⁶⁶

Not the least of hardships endured by children was the unimaginable fear of becoming lost and disoriented in a strange land. This happened to an extraordinary number of young girls and boys who went off to search for lost cattle, hunt, gather firewood, retrieve fresh water, or who simply left their trains on a sight-seeing adventure. The plains posed special problems because often there were no identifiable

landmarks, and the mountain and canyon country obscured the line of sight for lost children and their potential rescuers alike. Some lost children found their own way back to their trains or were rescued by members of their own or other companies. In 1854, near the fork of the Sweetwater River, twelve-year-old Lizzie Hunt left her camp in search of firewood when she completely lost her bearings. After finding the road, she walked five miles before she was fortunate enough to find another company of emigrants. Two of their members volunteered to return the exhausted girl to her family. When Lizzie and her rescuers rode into her panicked camp at eleven o'clock that night her mother was "nearly beside herself," wrote Lizzie's older sister, Nancy Hunt.⁶⁷

During their 1853 journeys, both Maria Belshaw and Amelia Knight described similar agonizing experiences. Maria Belshaw recorded that her nephew, William Belshaw, and his seven-year-old traveling companion, Charles Martin, left camp during dinner to retrieve a horse. William returned safely, but Charles, who could not see the wagons, took a wrong turn and became lost. He was missed within a half-hour of leaving camp, and after his family made several unsuccessful inquiries as to his whereabouts, thirty to forty fellow emigrants searched for the missing child until sunset, but failed to find him. "What agony did his parents endure during this time," wrote Maria Belshaw, "and what anxiety did his friends have until a man came to our wagon at sunset with the news that the child was safe." After following the Platte River near Laramie Peak for a half mile, Charles fortunately had found another company of wagons whose members treated him kindly, and they returned him unharmed to his forever-grateful parents.⁶⁸

Amelia Knight was also grateful for the return of her daughter, eight-year-old

Lucy, who was unintentionally left behind on the banks of the Malheur River when her wagon train departed for the twenty-two miles they would cover that day. Lucy had become distracted while she watched other wagons cross the river, and she was apparently unaware that her own party was leaving. “Not a soul had missed her,” wrote her mother, until another train pulled up hours later with the frightened child. Her parents and other siblings had assumed that she was in another wagon when the wagons had started to cross the river. It was a lesson they would not have to learn again.⁶⁹

Like Lucy Knight, not a soul had missed Hatty Jones after her company had inadvertently departed without her after stopping for lunch near the Snake River, according to her rescuer, John Lawrence Johnson, who, along with his parents and nine brothers and sisters, traveled to the Willamette Valley in 1851. Worn out from walking all morning on a July day in 1851, nineteen-year-old John had fallen asleep under some willows near the river. He awoke to discover that his train had left and realized that he would have to catch up on foot by following their tracks. Preparing to leave, John noticed a riderless horse near the river and recognized it as the horse that Hatty Jones, a child in his train, had been riding for the past month. He immediately assumed that she was taken by Indians and he further assumed that it would only be a matter of time before they would return for the horse. Although alone, John was determined to rescue his Hatty or die in the attempt. To his relief, John found her asleep not far from her horse where he woke her up and hoisted her on the horse with him. But instead of following the wagons, John decided to take a shorter route, hoping to reach the campsite ahead of his train. It proved to be a poor decision. There were deep ravines and steep hills to cross and John found himself disoriented at several

points. The ever-present fear of encountering Snake Indians, one of the tribes overlanders feared most, also consumed his thoughts. Fatefully, his fear was realized when a band of Indians intercepted them on their return to camp. Despite their clear vulnerability, these Indian men, instead of harming the two lone emigrants, simply rode off and left them to complete their journey. It was not until after dark and the Johnson train had made camp that anyone realized John and Hatty were missing. “The camp was quite excited and anxious when we came into camp,” wrote John, “and mother declared she would never again leave camp until all the children were rounded up.”⁷⁰

Some children who became lost or separated from their companies found their way back to their camps or were rescued by others while others, whose identities will never be known, either died from the elements or were never found. On June 3, 1850, two young boys traveling with the company of Solomon Osterhauadt went on a hunt and failed to show up in the evening. A twenty-man team searched for the boys for a day until they decided that their efforts were futile, and they gave up. After wandering alone for over two days, the boys luckily found their way back to camp.⁷¹ Others, however, were not so fortunate. Seventeen-year-old Caroline Reeder left her camp to gather some sagebrush for fuel for the evening campfire, but she never returned. Traveling with the 1856 Mormon handcart company of James Willie, Caroline took off her apron, gathered the sagebrush, and tied it up in a bundle in preparation for her return to camp. Already exhausted from the day’s journey, she sat down to rest for a short time. It was October, late in the year for overland travel, and the weather was unusually severe. When she did not return, some of the men of the company went to look for her. They found the teenaged girl leaning on her bundle of sagebrush, chilled

and unconscious. After her heavyhearted rescuers had carried her near-lifeless body back to camp, Caroline died, and was buried with others who had died the same day in an unmarked grave near the Sweetwater River. There was no time for mourning since colder weather threatened the lives of the rest of the party and they immediately pressed on to Salt Lake City.⁷²

Along with the fear of being lost in an unknown land went the fear of being at the mercy of wild animals, especially wolves whose disturbing sounds could be heard all night long. Helen Marnie Stewart, who traveled to Oregon with her family in 1853, wrote about how difficult it was to sleep at night: “We was afraid to go to sleep and we had a notion to read all night, but we thought that the light might attract attention. . . I fancied I heard wolves howling and Indians screaming and all sorts of noises.”⁷³ Although attacks by wolves on the trails were rare, they nonetheless occurred. During his overland trip, Lorenzo Waugh and one of his three young sons narrowly escaped a pack of wolves. But, it was the story of a German lad and his sister who were traveling with a train that had recently joined the train with which the Waughs were traveling that made a lasting impression on the 1852 pioneer. While preparing to depart for an ordinary day’s journey, Waugh and others from his company heard more than the usual howling of wolves, coupled with the screams of human voices. A group of more than twenty men immediately mounted their horses and rode in the direction of the sounds which became fainter by the moment. After an intense search, the group of men discovered the boy who, according to Lorenzo Waugh, was “nothing but bare bones . . . not a shred of his flesh being left.”⁷⁴ His sister was alive and dazed, sitting next to what was left of her brother. Dangerously, the two youths had camped some distance from the rest of their company in search of grass for their oxen. Waugh and

the others buried the boy and returned his sister to camp, but no words could console her about the disturbing experience.⁷⁵

A similar fate befell a man traveling with the 1856 Edward Martin handcart company, and an unidentified girl between nine and twelve years of age. Jonathan Stone had lagged behind his company after passing Fort Kearny, despite pleas from fellow travelers who urged him to keep pace with the group. It was late in the day, storm clouds were hanging low, and the company had planned to push on after their Platte River crossing. Still, Stone did not heed the advice of other emigrants, and by nightfall he had not reached camp. Later, it was learned that he had found his way into the camp of Captain John Hunt, a Mormon group traveling approximately ten miles east of the Martin Company, and that he was leading a young girl by the hand whom he had found alone on the plains. Jonathon Stone and the child had departed the camp immediately after dark, and neither Stone nor the girl were ever again seen alive. Captain Edward Martin recrossed the Platte River in an effort to find his brethren, and, after traveling a few miles he found both the bodies. Members of the Martin Company never learned the girl's name, but it was apparent that she and Stone, like the young German boy in Lorenzo Waugh's train, had met a violent death "upon which the Platte wolves had feasted the night before."⁷⁶

Not as deadly as wolves, bears, or larger animals, but an irritant nonetheless, were the insects, snakes and smaller predators that were ever-present throughout the cross-country journey. Mosquitoes were especially thick near rivers and in the lower valleys of the plains. Margaret Hecox described insects that were at least one inch long with sharp claws and legs, and recalled the nights when her children cried and had difficulty sleeping because of these threats.⁷⁷ Near the Sweetwater River, Elisha

Brooks remembered the grasshoppers as being “so thick as to dim the light of the sun, making us shield our faces at time with handkerchiefs or veils.”⁷⁸ Likewise, Clarence Bagley spoke about scorpions as a constant threat to everyone. Care had to be taken before putting on one’s shoes or clothing every morning, and Clarence became especially cautious after seeing his mother shake a particularly large scorpion out of her stocking one morning.⁷⁹ While climbing Independence Rock in 1847, an adventurous young girl accidentally placed her hand in a crevice where a snake unexpectedly struck. She was given large doses of whiskey to neutralize the venom and ultimately survived the ordeal.⁸⁰ Countless such incidents were recorded or remembered by children of the westward migration, and it was these smaller afflictions that impacted their daily lives with greater frequency than the more hazardous challenges.

Even though most emigrants packed what the guidebooks recommended as enough food and provisions to last the entire journey, hunger and thirst affected nearly all overlanders at one time or another during their trek. Forty-niner William Manly wrote that “people who have always been well fed, and have never suffered from thirst until every drop of moisture seemed gone from the body, so that they dare not open their mouth lest they dry up and cease to breathe, can never understand, nor is there language to convey the horrors of such a situation.”⁸¹ Children found it increasingly difficult to endure days when food and water were rationed. During the last leg of each journey many companies were compelled to depend on other emigrants for help, or they sent members ahead for provisions. In 1849, while crossing the expansive Great Salt Lake Desert, directly west of the Great Salt Lake, Sarah Royce and her company took in a couple of young men “scarcely beyond boyhood,” who were traveling with

only a horse and a mule. The unfortunates pleaded for flour, and, in return, promised to hunt for the group. Wrote Sarah, “we kept on sharing and hoping for the best . . . their efforts at hunting fruitless as they usually were.”⁸²

Fourteen-year-old Octavius M. Pringle remembered that a food shortage dictated the most dangerous moments in his family’s overland trip. With starvation threatening them barely 300 miles from their Oregon destination, it was decided that Octavius should take the only horse and travel with a group of men who were headed for the Willamette Valley. At a relief station 125 miles away, he hoped to secure provisions and then meet up with others who promised to return to the vicinity of his family with food. Unfortunately, the teenager soon learned that he was the only person returning, and that he would have to travel back through the wild country alone. Octavius courageously completed his mission as he thought of his parents, sisters and brothers who depended upon him for survival.⁸³

The reverse was true for seventeen-year-old Moses Schallenberger, member of the 1844 landmark Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party, when he and two other men, Joseph Foster and Allen Montgomery, were left behind in the Sierra Nevadas at what is now known as Donner’s Lake with six wagons, while other members forged on to Sutter’s Fort. It was late in November and the three quickly set about building a rude cabin which they thought would only be needed for a short time. Game seemed to be abundant, and their party also left behind two cows, so food was not considered a problem. But, because of unrelenting snowfall, their situation became desperate almost immediately, and all feared that they would perish in the snow. Sensing no possible hope, Foster and Montgomery made three pairs of snowshoes out of the hickory bows of the wagons and used strands of rawhide for the webbing. The three

emigrants slowly worked their way up to the summit, but the makeshift snowshoes did not fit properly, and incessant snowfall caused severe exhaustion. Schallenberger was unable to withstand the weight of the snow, and several times collapsed from severe leg cramps. His fatigue was so great that he decided to return to the cabin, settle in for the winter, and live on the quarter of beef that was still there. For the remainder of the winter, Moses Schallenberger lived alone, anxiously wondering if there would be a coyote or fox in the trap that he had set the night before. He later recorded, "My life was more miserable than I can describe. The daily struggle for life, and the uncertainty under which I labored were very wearing."⁸⁴

In late February 1845 the boy was rescued at the Truckee Lake camp by Dennis Martin who promised Elizabeth Townsend, wife of Dr. John Townsend and older sister of Moses Schallenberger that if her younger brother was alive, he would return him safely to Sutter's Fort. Though thin and weak from his limited diet, Martin found him to be in fairly good condition. He made Schallenberger a new pair of snowshoes and taught him how to use them properly. They proceeded across the summit and down the western slope of the Sierra Nevadas where they rejoined the main rescue party at Bear River. All members of the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party arrived safely at Sutter's Fort, although there was no mention as to the fate of Foster and Montgomery.⁸⁵ Ironically, it was the small crude cabin built by Schallenberger, Foster and Montgomery that was used by the family of Patrick Breen during their winter of entrapment with other members of the Donner-Reed party in 1846.⁸⁶

At age seventeen, Schallenberger survived the isolated and challenging winter of 1845. For the hundreds of children of the Mormon handcart companies, however,

hunger and thirst was a daily reality, and food and water distribution was beyond their control. In 1856 alone, there were more women than men in these poor but resolute companies, and more children under fifteen than either women or men.⁸⁷ Along with their parents, many of these young Mormon children had gone from a crowded immigrant ship to the end of the Rock Island Railroad Line in Iowa where they attempted to embark on a journey for which they lacked even the most basic of frontier skills. Most had never pitched a tent, slept on the ground, built a campfire or cooked outdoors. Thus, some of the most compelling and heartbreaking stories of starvation and catastrophic destitution on the trails were related by the numerous children who participated in the handcart expeditions.

Traveling with the Oscar Stoddard handcart company of 1860 was John Stettler Stucki, nine-year-old son of Samuel and Magdalena Stettler Stucki. Despite his young age, John was expected to help his father push the family's handcart to Salt Lake City. Without enough food, it was difficult for the already frail boy to find the strength that he needed to get through each day. When one of the teamsters traveling with his company shot a buffalo, the meat was divided among the entire company. The small piece that his father received was placed in the back of the handcart to be used for Sunday dinner, which was still days away. Remembered John, "I was so very hungry all the time, and the meat smelled so good to me while pushing the handcart, and having a little pocketknife, I could not resist but had to cut off a piece or two each half day. Although I was afraid of getting a severe whipping after cutting a little the first few times, I could not resist taking a little each half day. I would chew it so long it got tasteless."⁸⁸ When Samuel Stucki learned what his son had done, he did not say a word, and instead of scolding or whipping his son, the beleaguered emigrant wiped

tears from his eyes.⁸⁹

A member of the Edward Martin company was Margaret Ann Griffiths who was barely a teenager in 1856 when her family journeyed to Salt Lake City. When the snow and freezing weather arrived after the company had passed through Devil's Gate, Martin reduced food rations to four ounces of flour a day per person. Consequently, young Margaret saw many members of her company die along the way, including her twelve-year-old brother, John, and her six-year-old brother, Herbert. Because of the frozen ground and lack of proper equipment to dig graves, it was difficult for the men to bury these boys and others who had perished from the harsh conditions. Even before her brothers died, the children had witnessed their starved and enfeebled father try desperately to keep up with the group by taking hold of the rod of the endgate of the last wagon. This forbidden action enraged the teamster who at once proceeded to slash the elder Griffiths with his whip. The sickly man fell to the ground, unable to get up and press on. Although her feet ached, Margaret retraced the trail for three miles, but she failed to find her father whom she feared was dead. After discovering the tracks of another wagon train in the snow, her father, John Griffiths, weak from the lashing, had crawled on his hands and knees and managed to find another emigrant camp. Two men generously returned him to his own company, to the relief of his anxious family.⁹⁰

Anxiety was also prevalent when water was not readily available. While traveling west in 1852, thirteen-year-old Mary Jane Long remembered how distressing it was to hear other children beg for water, and how touched she was by the empathy displayed by her mother when a young sick girl in the company became so dehydrated that she had begun sucking on the wagon cover following a rare and recent rain. Her

face was black from the dirt on the wagon cover, and the pathetic situation prompted Mary Jane's caring mother to give the child some water. Recounted Mary Jane, "mother gave her a tablespoonful of water just as if it were medicine." Other siblings of the frail child soon died, and young Mary Jane attributed the assistance given by her mother as one of the reasons that the girl had lived.⁹¹

Young people often resorted to placing themselves at extreme risk if they were thirsty enough and the prospect for finding water seemed promising, as was the case with eighteen-year-old Martha Hill and her younger sisters. As her company neared the Rocky Mountains in 1852, Martha remembered that she and her sisters knew that their supply of water was running out. While walking ahead of the wagons, the hot and thirsty girls sighted what they thought were willows, which meant that water was not far away. After walking at least four miles, longer than they had anticipated, the girls discovered a beautiful stream. But because Indians were drying fish on the banks of the stream, they hesitated to indulge themselves. Fearing for their safety, Martha pleaded with her sisters not to continue, but they screamed back to their older sister that they would rather be killed by Indians than die of thirst. She knew that they were too far from the wagons for any help, and so she decided to join her sisters and drink from the stream, whatever their fate. One young Indian advanced toward the girls, but others seemed undecided about what to do, and held him back. They simply observed the girls drinking, and did nothing to harm them. "It may have been the first white girls that they had ever seen," Martha remembered thinking, "we took our lives in our hands that day, for no one knew where we were, and if the Indians had taken us captives, then God help us."⁹²

Lack of water was most prevalent during the desert crossings which both

Oregon-bound and California-bound travelers had to face. At those junctures, it was difficult for emigrants to provide enough water for their fatigued animals, and many oxen perished during desert crossings due to overwork and alkali poisoning. Lack of draft animals meant that many emigrants were compelled to abandon their wagons or, at the very least, lighten their loads by discarding valuable items that were not essential for survival. In 1850 alone, it has been estimated that the number of wagons abandoned on the forty-mile desert crossing in Nevada approaching the Truckee River was as high as one thousand.⁹³ As a child traveling west that same year, Margaret White remembered that the most unpleasant part of the journey was the crossing of the alkali district: "It was white as far as you could see. In some places a thick crust or scum was on top of the earth."⁹⁴ Sixteen-year-old Fanny Fry recalled that the ceaseless walking over alkali country caused her feet to swell and become sore to the point that she never had on a pair of shoes again for the remainder of her journey.⁹⁵

During his 1853 overland journey, Orson Stearns remembered that the men in his company labored constantly to keep their cattle away from alkali pools because the water was almost always fatal to the animals. "Sometimes it seemed as we were seldom out of reach of the stench of these dead animals in all stages of decomposition," recalled Orson.⁹⁶ In 1846, the family of Lucy Ann Henderson chose the dry and barren Applegate Cut-Off into Oregon. After crossing the Humboldt River, the Hendersons headed north across the desert. When they approached the Boiling Springs in Nevada, the eleven-year-old remembered that there was no stopping the cattle once they smelled water. Lucy was riding in the wagon when the family's oxen picked up the scent of water, "they ran as hard as they could go, our wagon bouncing along and nearly bouncing us out."⁹⁷ Traveling to Oregon as a young

child in 1850, John Roger James recounted unyoking cattle near the Green River after a long and hot day of travel. The animals charged down the bluffs to the river, stood in water up to their knees, and drank until their sides were swollen. To John, it looked as though they would kill themselves, but he was reassured by a fellow traveler that the thirst-crazed oxen would survive as long as they remained standing on all four feet.⁹⁸

By the 1850s, some overlanders who had completed their trips organized “water wagons” to make desert crossings more tolerable for new emigrants and to make money for themselves. Nearly crazy with thirst, families would often spend outrageous sums of money for this water. Beyond the Humboldt Sink, five dollars was offered for a single drink of water, and five gallons of water sold for fifty dollars in 1850.⁹⁹

Although not as common as other trail hardships, one of the most stressful experiences for young overlanders was confronting the harsh system of justice which was sometimes meted out on the trail. If a child was compelled to witness the punishment of a fellow traveler, it could be unsettling, but, if a family member was disciplined or condemned, it was an especially terrifying ordeal. When a family traveled with an organized train, members were subject to the mandates of the company, and if laws were violated, punishment was swift and certain. Judicial power was usually entrusted to the most respected men of the emigrating company who attempted to weigh the facts of a case and determine penalties for travelers accused of a crime. Whipping, abandonment or, less frequently, even execution were punishments that overlanders faced if predetermined laws were broken. Even for highly organized trains, it was often difficult for those in authority to sort out the circumstances surrounding a criminal act. But, if a company was small, unorganized, or under an extreme amount of pressure to keep moving, it was nearly impossible. In

those cases, emigrants often took justice into their own hands and decided a man's fate in a matter of hours. Some overlanders who were directly affected by crime and the system of justice during their journeys were haunted by their experiences for the rest of their lives, and, at least in the case of James Reed, it remained a shadow for the entire Donner-Reed Party, not only during their lifetime, but also for future generations.

During her 1846 journey to California, twelve-year-old Virginia Reed watched as her father, James Reed, was banished from his company after he had killed teamster and friend, John Snyder in a fit of rage. According to Virginia, a vehement argument ensued between her father and John Snyder over Snyder's abuse of his oxen. Reed warned Snyder to refrain from whipping the animals, but Snyder only became more enraged and proceeded to slash Reed with the butt of his whip. When Margaret Reed approached the two men and tried to make peace, Snyder slashed her over the head, drawing blood and causing James Reed to lash out with his knife and kill Snyder.¹⁰⁰ Other witnesses interpreted the event differently. Most agree that Milton Elliot, driver of the heavy Reed Palace Car, attempted to overtake the Graves wagon driven by Snyder on a narrow sandy hill. When the oxen became entangled, Snyder began to whip his oxen. Reed asked him to refrain from hitting the animals and to settle the dispute after they had reached the top of the hill. But Snyder, unable to control his anger, turned the lash on Reed and subsequently his wife, Margaret. In any case, the episode divided members of the train between those who wanted Reed hanged immediately and those who rejected a death sentence. As a compromise, Reed was exiled from the train almost certainly because those who opposed his death were more heavily armed than the others. Emigrants who witnessed the murder never agreed on

what happened on October 6, 1846. Billy Graves and Lewis Keseberg blamed Reed and John Breen said that Snyder never hit Margaret Breen. Although they did not condone Reed's actions, Milton Elliot and William Eddy felt Reed's death was not warranted and subsequently voted for banishment.¹⁰¹

Virginia believed that her father's sentence was cruel and that he had acted in self-defense. She further believed that he regretted the act, and she remembered how he had mournfully knelt over the dead body of Snyder, whom he considered his friend, and had offered boards from his own wagon from which to construct a coffin. Despite his insistence to ignore his sentence and remain with his family, Virginia's Mother, Margaret Reed, urged her husband to try to reach California, and then return with provisions. She knew that it would be difficult to continue without her husband, but she felt that if he remained, he would suffer at the hands of his enemies.¹⁰² So, James Reed set out alone into an unknown wilderness, and Virginia, who was an accomplished rider in her own right, followed him into the night with his rifle, ammunition, and some food: "I had determined to stay with him, and begged him to let me stay, but he would listen to no argument. . . . I realized that I must be strong and help mama bear her sorrows."¹⁰³ It was October when James Reed was banished without provisions or arms, and slow starvation or death from the elements seemed his likely fate. Everyday, Virginia looked for evidence that her father was still alive, hoping to see a letter by the road, scattered bird feathers, or a split stick. But there was no trace of James Reed, and Virginia did not learn of his fate until March of 1847 when he returned from Sutter's Fort to Donner Lake to help with the rescue of his destitute and famished children.¹⁰⁴ Reed's family were elated to learn that he had survived and that he was able to participate in their rescue.

Despite Virginia's unequivocal defense of her father, James Reed was forever disturbed by the violent act. Self-defense or not, he failed to speak of it for decades and he therefore contributed to a legacy of discord for future descendants of the Donner-Reed Party. One-hundred-fifty years after the incident, the truth about the Snyder killing remains elusive as evidenced by a dispute which erupted among some descendants of the company who gathered for a California Trail Days Reunion in 1996. Reed's defenders still consider him a man who was wrongfully punished while others see him as a coward who killed a man for little reason. "After fifteen decades, the anger will still burn. The facts will still be clouded," wrote Frank J. Mullen, Jr.¹⁰⁵

Four children who traveled with Ezra Meeker in 1852 were, like Virginia Reed, forced to come to terms with the hasty manner in which justice was carried out on the trails in a case which involved their father. Meeker recounted the incident which occurred near the Sweetwater River and involved a murder during the commission of a robbery. A council of twelve men was called which quickly determined that the suspect, the children's father, was guilty. Yet, there was disagreement as to what his fate should be since he was traveling with his wife and small children. Public sentiment favored sparing the man's life in order not to endanger the lives of his family. But, after debate and deliberation, the council voted in favor of death, and the man was hanged in the presence of his family. Before the execution was carried out, the council made the necessary provisions to insure the safety of his wife and children, which included providing them with a driver for the remainder of the journey. Still, it must have been especially troublesome for young children to learn that their father had murdered another man, and then to see him hang before their own eyes.¹⁰⁶

The inability to factually sort out evidence after a criminal act also affected

older children who were sometimes subject to the same retribution as adults in cases of comparable offenses. The cases of two teenage boys who were hoping to find a company to travel west with in Council Bluffs in 1853 and the case of fifteen-year-old George Washington Bean were examples of this reality. After the death of his father in Nauvoo, Bean joined the Mormon exodus of 1847. He was the main support for his sister Sarah Ann, whose husband was away fighting with the Mormon Battalion, and her small baby. After leaving Fort Laramie, travel became slow and tedious, and George Bean grew increasingly impatient with the pace of his company. In an effort to gain the coveted first position in the line of wagons, he cracked his ox whip over the head of a jealous driver behind him who was angrily lashing Bean's oxen. The teenager was thus required to appear before a Mormon court which would make a determination about his possible court martial. Sarah Ann was not allowed to be present at the hearing of her brother or to testify on his behalf. "My conscience was clear as I won my place," remembered George, but, "as the accusations of insubordination mounted, I never felt more alone."¹⁰⁷ Jedediah Grant, captain of the company, defended George Bean for an honest effort to hasten the pace of the group, and because of this support, the youth was subsequently acquitted. Sarah Ann was overjoyed that George was released, and she shed tears of joy knowing that she would be secure for the duration of the journey into the Salt Lake Valley.¹⁰⁸

Overlander Henry Allyn was disturbed by an event that occurred while he was in Council Bluffs waiting with his company for a ferry to cross the Missouri River. In May of 1853, two young boys, James Samuels and Waltenberg Muir, both barely seventeen-years-old, had traveled from St. Joseph together with the intention of gaining passage with an emigrant train bound for California. They found a company to

travel with, and were immediately assigned the duty of guarding the camp and stock. After their first night's watch, emigrants in the town were horrified to wake up the following morning and see that one of the boys, James Samuels, was dead. His chest and neck were gashed, and the ax with which the murder was committed was lying near the boy's lifeless body. Muir sat on a stump beside the body, unable to escape the scene of the crime since the horse that he had stolen for that purpose had been retrieved by the owner. The youth blamed the event on Indians, and pointed to a scar on his own head, but the hastily-formed jury was unanimous in its verdict of guilt. The teenager, who proclaimed his innocence until the end, was hanged on the limb of a basswood tree near the site of the murder. "To all appearances he was not over seventeen," wrote Henry Allyn, "thus, a blooming youth, that might have been a blessing to society and his country, was called to expiate his crimes."¹⁰⁹

The Samuels-Muir murder case was evidence that emigrants could expect limited, if any, judicial protection from newly established governments. In January 1853, Kanesville was given the name of Council Bluffs and a charter was created incorporating it as a city. In April, city officers were elected and by law it was their right to administer justice. But the new government was weak in the summer of 1853 when the Samuels murder occurred. There was little revenue, the new Mayor almost immediately resigned, and the government in Council Bluffs virtually ceased to exist for two years. After Samuels was murdered, Muir was placed in the hands of the Sheriff who attempted to have the youth tried by an organized county jury. But the unruly mob of California emigrants were intolerant of this slow system of justice and demanded a quicker method of trial and punishment. So, Waltenberg Muir, like other pioneers who ventured beyond securely established governments, was at the mercy of

what became known as “Judge Lynch’s Court” and the matter was resolved within one day.¹¹⁰

Added to cases which involved family members and older children were cases in which young emigrants were mere observers of the system of justice. Traveling to Oregon in 1862, thirteen-year-old Michael Speelman said that he witnessed a trial and execution of a man found guilty of murdering his traveling companion, and that it was one of the most vivid memories of his months on the trail. Both murderer and victim were traveling in the company ahead of the Speelmans’ train near the Sweetwater River. The captain of a wagon train that was traveling behind the Speelmans, whose name was Kennedy, found, and subsequently buried the body. Despite pleas to turn the guilty young man over to a military party near the scene, Kennedy instead proceeded to take the law into his own hands. He quickly appointed a jury which found the man guilty, and offered the condemned criminal the choice of death by hanging or by shooting. After choosing the latter, the murderer was blindfolded, a grave was dug, Kennedy gave the order to fire, and shots rang out. “I was present and observed everything that occurred,” remembered the thirteen-year-old. Michael also clearly recalled that after the disturbing incident, Kennedy’s company of over three hundred emigrants had resented how their captain had handled the episode, and, as a result, the large wagon train broke up into smaller parties. In a short time, the discontented smaller units fell far behind the Speelmans for the remainder of the journey to Oregon.¹¹¹

In the end, every journey west was a history of hardship, and the many hardships that young emigrants encountered during their travel over plains, rivers and mountains revealed their resilience and adaptability and better prepared them for their

eventual new lives in a frontier setting. When J. Goldsborough Bruff lingered at his Sierra Nevada camp and chronicled the condition of the successive waves of the 1849 emigration, he noted that it was the children who seemed to better withstand the hardships and exposure.¹¹² And, because of their valuable contributions, the children who journeyed west should be recognized for the hardships and mortal dangers they endured as emigrants. All overlanders were filled with a sense of relief and accomplishment when they reached their destinations. After his family had completed a successful journey to Oregon, Henry Garrison, who was fifteen-years-old in 1846, recounted: "Our journey is ended, our toils are over, but I have not tried to portray the terrible conditions we were placed in. No tongue can tell, nor pen describe the heartrending scenes through which we passed."¹¹³



FIGURE 3

Elkhorn River Crossing, Northwest of present-day Omaha, Nebraska

Tragedy and narrow escapes were unavoidable when crossing the countless rivers and streams that dotted the western landscape. Young emigrants spoke of the anticipation of possible disaster often being worse than the actual crossing.

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CHAPTER THREE

CULTURES IN CONFLICT

Indian and Emigrant Contact on the Overland Trails

The Indians were fine looking and had the appearance of wealth and independence. They seemed indifferent to whites, but not aggressive nor impudent. That first village made a great impression on my mind. I thought they were a very grand sort of people.¹

— Elizabeth Lord: age eight at the time of her journey

“Extreme Vigilance Advised,” was the epitaph carved on the headboard of a newly-dug grave that the family of eight-year-old Elizabeth Lord passed by along Burnt River in eastern Oregon during their 1850 trek west. Buried there was a man who had suffered a fatal bullet wound and it was widely rumored that he had been killed by Indians. Fear of an Indian attack escalated among members of the Lord wagon train, and the children were told to stay close to the wagons at all times. Elizabeth remembered that they traveled until dark that day, covering nearly twenty-five miles of terrain that was described by John C. Frémont as one of the worst stretches on the emigrant trail.² At the end of the strenuous and terror-filled day, Elizabeth’s father believed that such mania was unwise and that it would be better to risk being killed by Indians than to push travelers and livestock to death. “From that time on,” recounted Elizabeth, “we did no more running from imaginary Indians.” The Lords took the threat seriously even though their experience on the trail had revealed that the Indians were primarily interested in trading with overlanders, and not

annihilating them.³ Accounts such as Elizabeth Lord's, where a fear of Indian "depredations" or "massacre" was blown out of proportion, were all-too-familiar among westward bound emigrants.

Native Americans and overland travelers routinely interacted throughout the years that the Oregon, California and Mormon trails carried emigrants to their western destinations. For the most part their relationship consisted of peaceful trading, mutual fascination, and pioneers' reliance upon native expertise in an unfamiliar land. Indians of many tribes guided emigrants through *terra incognita*, assisted them in making difficult river crossings, aided them in rafting down treacherous rivers, helped them with their wagons in ascending and descending difficult cliffs, sold them food, and bartered for useful items. Even if they took advantage of this assistance, many emigrants complained about Indians stealing livestock, begging for food, requesting liquor, demanding payments for crossing their land, and exacting tolls for passage across a river.

But, it was the cultural misunderstandings between the two groups, especially the concept of property ownership, that resulted in increased tension and open conflict as the trickle of white emigrants in the 1840s became a flood during the 1850s and 1860s. Lands acquired in the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, the Mexican War of 1846-1848, and the settling of the Oregon boundary dispute between Britain and the United States in 1846 promoted a growing sentiment in favor of the drive for territorial expansion. Most Americans believed that all lands were in essence public land, and that it was their right to secure them for a united America.⁴

The post gold-rush emigrants were not as familiar to Indians as the trappers and traders whom they had known in the early part of the century and who often

intermarried into their tribes. Most of this new breed of emigrants had little incentive to develop relationships with Native Americans, and were not overly concerned about their behavior toward them. Their trek across the continent was most likely a once-in-a-lifetime undertaking, and many emigrants cared little about what might happen to emigrants traveling behind them. Consequently, the later trail years became more hazardous and volatile as Indians began to realize that white encroachment was endless and that tribal hunting grounds and buffalo herds were shrinking.

No objective information was available to properly prepare easterners for their initial contacts with Native Americans, and rumors of Indian horrors, often received second-hand, caused a frenzy among overlanders. Rumors spread fast along the entire course of the trail despite the fact that most companies made the trip without experiencing any major difficulties with Indians.⁵ Emigrant guidebooks such as Joseph E. Ware's, The Emigrants' Guide to California, warned overlanders of Indian thievery and encouraged them to be "prepared to resist their attacks."⁶ Circulars that alerted emigrants of possible Indian depredations were routinely distributed throughout the various jumping-off towns. Eleven-year-old Robert Parker, who traveled to California in 1850 under the guardianship of Ledyard and Margaret Frink, was affected by the concern that Margaret displayed after she had read such a printed leaflet. Her worries increased and she grew to believe that her party, which included only three men, one woman and one eleven-year-old boy armed with one gun and one Colt revolver, would be defenseless against hostile Indian tribes over the course of two thousand miles.⁷

At the beginning of their journeys, children's perceptions of Indians were shaped by the views of their parents, views that were frequently conflicting. Some

overlanders admired and were sympathetic to Indians on the trail; some viewed them as “children” or “savages”; some considered them a nuisance, a mere obstacle to progress; some wanted to convert them to Christianity and “bring light to their darkened minds;” and some were brutally cruel.⁸ Additionally, few emigrants understood that Native Americans possessed loyalty to their individual tribes rather than to the notion of a united Indian Nation, which often led them to make inaccurate generalizations about Indians encountered along the trails. As their journeys west progressed, some young overland travelers gradually developed perceptions of Indians, both positive and negative, that differed from those of the adults with whom they traveled.

Younger children especially feared that, without warning, they might be attacked, captured or scalped by hostile Indians. Yet, scalping was a practice that had been utilized by both Indians and whites long before the westward migration began. Throughout their history many Indian tribes regarded the scalp of an enemy as a trophy and a symbol of their own warrior abilities. The custom escalated when the Europeans arrived in America and created scalp bounties, which offered the bearer a fixed amount for each scalp taken from an enemy tribe. In an effort to make her daughter less desirable to Indian scalpers, the mother of Lucy Fosdick had the child’s hair cropped short before their 1861 departure.⁹ Similarly, Henry Gilfry, aged ten in 1852, began his journey with an instilled fear of Indians, and was repeatedly told that there was a likely chance that emigrants would be scalped or butchered. But when he saw an Indian for the first time near Keg Creek in Iowa, Henry was relieved that the man did not look like the formidable savage he had been led to believe, “as we saw neither tomahawks nor gleaming scalping knives, the terror of the savage Indian soon

lost their charm for us.”¹⁰ Thus, when adult overlanders, plagued by their own anxieties, displayed such an inordinate amount of distress, it was only natural for children to absorb and exaggerate the threat of Indians and the possible horrors that lay before them.

Many young emigrants encountered their first Indians at one of the several staging posts on the Missouri River even before they left “civilization” and entered “Indian territory.” Although some children, such as those of Amelia Knight and Margaret Hecox, panicked at the first sight of an Indian and dashed to their wagons for cover, a greater number of young overlanders commented on their peaceful manner, cultural habits and physical appearance. While in Omaha in 1859, eighteen-year-old Charles Frederick True noticed that many Indians were loitering about and that they simply added to the “picturesque scene” of the town.¹¹ After crossing the Missouri River at St. Joseph in 1849, William McClellan, one of five children bound for California with his parents, remembered that “the Indians were not troublesome except in cases where they could get liquor they sometimes made lively demonstrations and flourished their tomahawks in a rather savage manner.”¹² When Indians circled the McClellan wagon, the children scurried into the wagon and were frightened by the noises that they made, only to watch as they “all turned and galloped off.”¹³ At her family’s camp near St. Joseph in 1852, Mary Alexander Variel referred to the first Indians that she saw as “tame Indians.” She declined an invitation of the “old chief” to go over to his fire to warm her tea. Her three-year-old son Robert was predictably terrified by the proposition, but sensing little fear, Mary handed the child fifty cents to give to the elderly Indian. After accepting the coins, the chief bowed and extended his invitation once again, thus lessening Robert’s instilled fears of hostile Indians for the

remainder of their journey.¹⁴

Teenagers Upton Swingley and Welborn Beeson were both fascinated with the Indians' style of eating while camped with their trains in Council Bluffs. In 1850, fifteen-year-old Swingley waited with his company at the Missouri River for at least three weeks during which time thousands of emigrants mingled with the Omaha and Pawnee Indians. One of the boys in the Swingley wagon train had traded a dog for a pair of moccasins. After the exchange was made, members of the company watched in shock as the Indians knocked the animal in the head, threw him on the campfire, and roasted him "head and all," and then carried him off to their camp.¹⁵ While he was camped in Council Bluffs in 1853, seventeen-year-old Beeson noted that the Indians had a peculiar way of eating. He observed them cutting slices of meat off of a dead cow that was mired in a swamp and he was amazed that they ate the meat raw.¹⁶ Both boys, like most young emigrants who had contact with Native Americans, were fascinated by cultures that contrasted so dramatically with their own, but they failed to note that many Indians camped in the Council Bluffs-Omaha area were destitute by this era. Perhaps their rush to eat the dog and the uncooked meat of the cow had more to do with their near starvation than to any unique features within their traditional lifestyle.

Some younger travelers found it humorous when Indians imitated the ways of the white man, especially with regard to dress. At eastern Nebraska's Elkhorn River crossing, Juliette Fish commented on the demeanor of an Indian who had returned from Washington and was dressed in a soldier's uniform: "It was worn as an outside garment, and gave him a very odd appearance. He had flattened and polished some silver coins, joined them together and fastened them to his hair so that they hung down

from the crown of his head to the ground. He looked fine and seemed to know it.”¹⁷ For Jesse Applegate, age seven in 1843, and other children who journeyed west to Oregon with the Applegate train, it was a “grand sport” to see Indians dressed in white man’s clothes. When the company approached Salmon Falls in Idaho, the Snake Indians were anxious to trade their freshly dried salmon for new clothes. “They enjoyed strutting around in their newly acquired garments,” remembered Jesse, “and seemed to delight in the laughter of the white children.”¹⁸ At the Falls, some children of the Applegate train encountered an Indian who wore nothing but a shirt and vest, and another who wore only a hat. They were “dressed to kill,” and did not seem to object to the young emigrants “having fun at their expense.”¹⁹

Throughout the course of their journeys, overlanders repeatedly misinterpreted the rituals and intentions of Native Americans who seemed to be perpetually on the warpath. Many mistakenly thought that their intention was to murder whites, when in fact most of the tribes were merely practicing tribal customs. Such was the case with John Braly who, after crossing the Kaw River in Kansas, recounted how members of his 1847 wagon train panicked and prepared for the worst as a “big band of Kaw warriors, with their warpaint on, came sweeping down upon us on their horses, carrying bows and arrows and spears.”²⁰ Yet, before a shot was fired, or an arrow released, a Kaw rode up to the wagons and made it clear that his tribe was friendly, and merely preparing for a buffalo hunt.²¹

More seriously, overlanders misunderstood the intertribal warfare that had traditionally taken place among the tribes for decades, especially among those tribes roaming north of the Platte River and west of the Missouri River where rivalries were complex and intense. Many emigrants were convinced that they would inadvertently

be caught up in such conflicts, when, in all probability, the tradition saved many emigrant lives. The opinions that whites held of Native Americans were shaped most by this complex system of rivalries and alliances, and led many emigrants to conclude that the native peoples were murderous nomads in desperate need of Christian and agrarian values. Overlanders also failed to realize that a warrior's bravery in battle was crucial to increasing personal status in his own tribe.

The plains Indians who had the most impact on the Oregon, California and Mormon Trails were the Sioux and Pawnee.²² In 1850, fifteen-year-old Upton Swingley's impressions of the Sioux were typically conflicting as he described them as "most warlike" and also "very sociable." "They tried to talk the English language," recounted Swingley, "but all they could say was what they heard the men say to their oxen, and this was mostly cussing."²³ On numerous occasions it was at Fort Laramie where the triumphant Sioux or Pawnee tribes celebrated their victories. Arrival at the fort usually meant a day or so of rest for weary emigrants and a time for repair and provisioning. The Sioux often encamped near Fort Laramie and for many travelers this was their first face-to-face encounter with impressive gatherings of Indians who seemed anxious to display their recently collected scalps.

When the Hockett family arrived at Fort Laramie in June 1847, the Pawnee had just returned from a successful battle with the Sioux and they wished to celebrate their victory by performing a war dance for emigrants inside the stockade at the fort. Nine-year-old W.A. Hockett's view of Indians was already jaded due the cruel treatment that his uncle and another company member had previously endured at the hands of an unfriendly band of Indians who had encountered them while they were hunting on the plains. Although 1847 was a year of little violence along the trails,

unidentified Indians had found these two lone hunters, robbed them of their guns and clothing, and left them nothing but their hats and boots. Hockett's uncle unwisely resisted the assault and the leader of the band proceeded to beat him over the back with his bow. In some places his skin was split four or five inches, remembered Hockett, and he was in severe pain for many days.²⁴

Understandably, the young boy was filled with terror at the time that the Hockett train reached Fort Laramie. He remembered that the soldiers let the Indians enter the fort, but he was relieved to learn that they were not allowed to carry weapons inside. He later recalled that "when the dance was started, if ever a boy wished he was somewhere else, I was that boy. I was certain we would all be killed. There must have been at least three to four hundred Indians jumping, writhing, yelling, twisting, and waving those Sioux scalps which were held at the end of sticks about four feet long."²⁵ The previous year, Jacob Harlan had witnessed a similar scene when a large group of Sioux had returned to the fort after defeating the Pawnees. His description was much like that of Hockett's: "the Sioux were all in war paint and danced around the fire with Pawnee scalps in their hands. The one who had taken the most scalps received the greatest honor. They were hideous to behold."²⁶

During her 1846 trip across the plains, eleven-year-old Lucy Ann Henderson was awestruck by a war dance at Fort Laramie, and was both simultaneously terrified and fascinated by the painted faces of the celebrating Indians reflecting off the firelight. But, she was equally enthralled by an Indian girl who some referred to as "Princess Mary." The exquisite young woman was the only Indian that Lucy ever thought was truly pretty. Her costume was beautiful, remembered Lucy, "almost exactly like the Chinese costume, with coat and trousers. It was of buckskin, bleached

and very soft. It was most elaborately embroidered with beads, and of course she was quite the thing. But I was afraid of Indians, so I didn't go very close to her."²⁷ When the Hendersons pulled out of Fort Laramie, Lucy looked back and imprinted on her mind forever were the vast numbers of Indians on the prairie "as far as the eye could reach" and "constantly on the move."²⁸ The vision was at once frightening, intriguing, and beautiful, but scenes of grand numbers of proud Native Americans would dramatically change and ultimately cease as increasing numbers of white settlers moved west.

Traveling to California in 1865, nineteen years after Lucy Henderson's journey, Ruth Shackleford's description of the Native Americans that her company encountered on the plains was quite different. Her three young girls, Sarah, age eight, Mary, age seven, and Debbie, age six, dreaded contact with Indians especially after they saw a grave near a telegraph post where eleven men were buried who had been killed by Indians the previous year. Later, on their journey near Julesburg, Colorado, Ruth wrote: "we met about sixty soldiers with some Indian prisoners that they had taken in a fight near Laramie and were taking to Kearny. . . . There were some squaws and papooses, the squaws were on horseback with a pole, one end of which was tied to their shoulder, the other end on the ground, the papooses were tied on the pole."²⁹ During the early trail years, many children had recognized and spoken about the splendor of Native American culture, but those traveling in later years found less cooperation and fewer places for intimate contact with "Noble Red Men."

As young overlanders moved across the plains during the migration years, they were often mesmerized by Indian burial customs. The various tribal rituals were generally unlike the traditions that surrounded death in the white culture. Inquisitive

young travelers commented on the diverse ways in which Indians of different tribes buried their dead. Near the Des Moines River in 1850, eighteen-year-old John Steele described finding an Indian village that was once inhabited by the Sac and Fox tribes. Near the ruined village was a burial ground where many Indian graves were marked by posts that were ornamented with the totem outlines of men, animals and birds. Young Steele's heart was saddened by the devastation that he witnessed that day, but it would not be the last time that he would feel such sorrow. On the expansive prairie near the Nishnabotna River in western Iowa, Steele had discovered another cemetery that was enclosed with a fence. In it were many unkept Indian graves, surrounded by the ruins of abandoned homes. The unsightly graveyard revealed the "vain effort to protect the graves from desecration," wrote the eighteen-year-old, "and is a touching reminder of the race which occupied this wide continent and is fading away in the far west."³⁰

Steele's mature insights regarding the plight of Native Americans were uncommon for an overlander so young. The empathy expressed in his revelations were perhaps due to the fact that the company Steele had intended to travel with under the guidance of his uncle had deserted him in Council Bluffs. Determined to continue westward, he set out on foot alone until he had caught up with a train that was willing to take him in near Loup Fork, Nebraska. He thus had no family members or longtime friends to influence and predetermine his perceptions about Native Americans encountered on the line of march.³¹

While passing through the land of the Crow tribe on her journey to Oregon in 1851, nineteen-year-old Harriet Talcott Buckingham wrote about coming across a large grove of trees where an Indian corpse was supported by the branches. She was

intrigued that the body was wrapped in robes and blankets and that arrows and bows were placed around the head.³² Likewise, after his family had passed through Devil's Gate on their way to Salt Lake City in 1854, eight-year-old Jean Frederick Loba was impressed by the unique way that some Indians had wrapped their dead in red blankets and hung them from trees, or, in treeless areas, from platforms that were constructed by four posts. The boy, like other children who spoke about Indian corpses hanging from trees, surmised that this process was adopted to protect the body from being devoured by wolves on the prairie.³³ Teenagers Eliza Ann McAuley and Martha Hill, both 1852 pioneers, spoke about passing by Indian burial grounds in which the bodies were placed in holes that were carved out of hills and the corpses were placed in sitting positions. Near Chimney Rock, Martha Hill observed that in one case an Indian was buried with his hat on, and his blankets, cooking utensils, bow and arrows, and everything that he must have owned had been placed toward the front of the grave.

Later in her journey to Oregon, while camped along the Snake River in Idaho, Martha and her sisters were summoned by a member of their party who went into the camp of a band of Snake Indians after he had heard loud noises. The girls needed no urging to walk the quarter of a mile to see the burial rites of an Indian woman who had just died. Martha remembered that the body of the woman was lying on the ground of her tent, with tribal members gathered around her "making the most gruesome noise I ever heard. . . . It was the tradition of this tribe for each one of the dead squaw's family to throw themselves on her dead body, then run and jump in the river, swim around for awhile and then show themselves on the bank, presumably free from evil spirits."³⁴ This grieving and purification ceremony was an experience that the Hill girls would have missed had they taken their mother's advice to stay away from the

ceremony for fear of contracting a contagious disease.³⁵

For the duration of their journeys virtually every emigrant had the opportunity to trade with Native Americans. Children especially coveted some kind of Indian artifact, preferably moccasins, blankets, buffalo robes or beads, to remind them of their days on the trail, while adult emigrants especially desired Indian horses. Native Americans, in turn, were interested in the white man's food, weapons, ammunition, tobacco, trinkets, alcohol, cattle, and in some cases, white women and children. Yet, overlanders of all ages were quick to learn that Indians were seasoned bargainers and not the "easy mark" that many had presumed.³⁶

If Indians wanted to trade with a wagon train, they would often send ahead one of their members who would indicate this desire by the use of sign language. In 1859, U.S. Army Captain Randolph B. Marcy wrote a travel guide for emigrants entitled, The Prairie Traveler, which described the various signals used by different tribes if their objective was to trade with a train: "As all the wild tribes have their peculiar pantomimic signals by which they are known, they will then answer the inquiry by giving their signal."³⁷ Marcy also warned travelers that Indians customarily approached wagon trains at full speed, suggesting hostility to many emigrants, which in many cases was not their intention.³⁸ That is exactly what happened to Helen Stewart's wagon train in 1853, six years before Marcy's handbook was available. Near Court House Rock, the company was advised to be cautious since there were many Indians in the vicinity and they had "laid down their blankets," which some thought was a warning for emigrants to expect hostility. But the large band of Indians that so frightened everyone proved to be friendly, and these travelers soon learned that their fears were unfounded. Wrote Helen, "indeed they were very friendly with us for

they was one come first and shook hands with us and showed us a piece of paper that had the name of everything he wanted such as tobacco, flour, coffee, and a whole lot of other things. . . . I saw some of the prittyist girls to and they ware drest so nice after their own fashion of course.”³⁹

Still, young emigrants such as Nellie Slater, traveling with her family to Oregon in 1862, did not seem to care about whether trading practices between emigrants and Native Americans were peaceful. She remained convinced that “massacre” was a continued reality, especially since numerous Indians were following her train. Wrote Nellie, “Theres been twenty Indians following us all afternoon. I suppose they wanted to attack the train.”⁴⁰ Eleven-year-old Henry Ferguson was of a similar mindset when he traveled to California in 1849, even though the Indians that his party had encountered were friendly. Describing the Pawnees in Nebraska, Henry recounted that “while they seemed friendly, no doubt they were planning our downfall.”⁴¹ In 1853, after traveling over a cactus-covered desert near the Bear River valley, the train of Orson Stearns reached a trading post and several Indian lodges. The ten-year-old and some of the other children were excited at the diversion, and they approached the trader’s tent “more out of curiosity that anything else.” But the presence of the young white emigrants seemed to anger the Indians, and, without apparent provocation, one of the Indians shoved the youth backward into a large prickly pear. The pain was intense and the imbedded spines of the desert plant had to be removed from Orson’s feet by some of the adults of his train. Leaders of the company expressed outrage, but this did not deter at least two of the Indian boys who rode their horses at top speed when the train pulled out. It took a great presence of mind for the drivers to keep their wagons under control. So, at least for the children of

the Stearns party, trading with Indians proved to be an unsettling experience.⁴²

Some Indians also seemed to display a curious interest in trading for white women and children which frightened most every emigrant parent on the trails. Diaries and reminiscences are filled with numerous accounts of Indians bargaining for emigrant children, although, in such cases, actual diaries kept on the trail are generally more reliable than reminiscences written years after the experience when people often tended to embellish their tales. Stephen Staats was a young boy in 1845 when he made his journey to Oregon, and, years later, he recounted that there was a man in his train by the name of Bailey who had a beautiful daughter. Near Fort Laramie, the young girl, with pail in hand, went to the banks of the Platte River for water. There a Sioux man attempted to capture this “piece of feminine beauty,” but the Bailey girl managed to return to her camp where the emigrant men had to display their rifles before the Indian would leave. After this rejection, the Indian returned undaunted and tried to negotiate with the mother of another young girl. He offered the woman twenty horses, “a handsome price,” according to Staats, but the bargain was not made, and the company pushed on.⁴³

That same year, emigrant Mary Jane Chambers was noted as a strikingly beautiful girl of about sixteen years of age. After her train had descended the Blue Mountains near the Umatilla Valley in Oregon, an Indian chief offered her father fifty ponies and one hundred blankets for the girl. Her unwillingness to be sold was not well received by the Indian who believed that the price he had offered was more than fair. After this scare, Mary Jane’s attitude toward Indians became so extreme that she no longer showed her face when they were in the vicinity.⁴⁴ Similarly, while on the Oregon Trail just beyond Fort Hall, at a point on the journey where the Snake Indians

had become more troublesome than the plains tribes, eleven-year-old Joaquin Miller noted another serious event. A man named Wagoner was traveling with his large family which included a beautiful daughter. An Indian chief asked the 1852 emigrant what he would take in exchange for the girl. Not taking the Indian offer seriously, Wagoner informed the chief that he would accept ten beautiful spotted horses such as the one that the man was riding. That same day the Indian returned to the train with the ten spotted horses and a band of warriors to ensure that the bargain was concluded. After learning the possibility of her fate, the young Wagoner girl threatened to throw herself in a river from a steep bluff rather than leave with the Indians. When the chief realized the extent of her terror, he reluctantly relented and led his warriors off, “scornfully refusing what presents were offered him for his forbearance.”⁴⁵

For Mary Variel, pioneer of 1852, it was the longest five minutes of her life when she consented to appease an Indian chief by letting him hold her three-month-old baby girl. The man took the child and made circles at full speed around the wagon train before returning the girl to her anxious mother in exchange for some sugar and crackers.⁴⁶ The family of five-year-old Nancy Porter endured a similar scare in 1848 when their train was surrounded by a band of Sioux while encamped on the banks of the Platte River. A Sioux woman came up to Nancy’s step-mother, Lydia Porter, and asked to see her baby son. Lydia consented and the Indian woman took the baby into a nearby crowd of Indians who curiously observed the child. “Mother was crying and I was screaming as loud as I could,” remembered Nancy. The women of the train mercilessly criticized Lydia’s decision to hand her baby over to Indians, while the men of the train hurriedly lined up with their guns, even threatening war if the child was not returned. The Sioux woman, who spoke some English, soon returned the child and

said, “here take it, here take it.” The Porters were anxious to move on, hoping for no more such trouble.⁴⁷

After reports of such incidents reached other emigrants, mothers frequently scrambled to get the children in the wagons, pull the canvas shut, and hold them by their clothing when Indians were present, even though abduction of white children was rarely an Indian motive.⁴⁸ In 1850, near Fort Laramie, eleven-year-old John Roger James seemed interested in the way Indians lived. In an effort to satisfy his curiosity, the young boy approached the opening of an Indian teepee where he was fascinated to see strings of buffalo meat hanging from the tent and he received an offer of an Indian woman to show him around their camp. His mother was terrified for her son and feared that the only intention of the Indians was to lead the boy into captivity.⁴⁹ Yet, as historian George R. Stewart asserts in his book, The California Trail: An Epic With Many Heroes, it is important to keep in mind that white people were objects of curiosity to Native Americans, just as Indians seemed exotic to emigrants. Their desire to associate with white women and children should be kept in perspective. According to Stewart, “their warriors were seldom sex-starved and probably did not lust after paleface maidens, though many an emigrant girl thought that they did . . . their honor was won in other ways.”⁵⁰

While young emigrants acquired both positive and negative attitudes toward Native Americans during trading experiences, they were saddened and incensed if they learned that their favorite animals had been stolen by Indians, or if their parents made the decision to barter a favorite animal to be used as a toll payment. Thievery was one of the most common depredations that emigrants endured at the hands of Indians on their treks west, and many older children spoke about the dilemma since

they were often allocated the responsibility of protecting livestock and wagons.

Clarence Bagley, who traveled to Oregon as a young boy, remembered that during his trip west in 1852, members of his company displayed little fear of Indians except “to protect ourselves from the pilfering of articles about camp and from stealing horses at night.”⁵¹

A great sadness enveloped the 1849 train of eleven-year-old Henry Ferguson, one of hundreds of wagon trains which lost cattle to Indians. While they were encamped on the banks of the Platte River, not yet one hundred miles into their journey to California, seven of their best yoke of oxen turned up missing. The guards that were on duty the night when the Ferguson train was approached by Pawnees were alert and managed to keep their cattle secure, despite two attempts by the Indians to steal their oxen. But by the third attempt, the cattle had become uncontrollably frightened, and the Indians were successful in their efforts. They drove the cattle up the river for several miles where they killed them and closely guarded the booty in case the emigrants attempted to retrieve the meat. Many members of the company demanded revenge, but this was one of relatively few cases where emigrants were aware that their action would affect those who traveled behind them. “Many of the young men of our company begged to go and take some of the meat and put strychnine in the carcasses, and thus get revenge,” remembered Henry Ferguson, “but the counsel of our worthy captain, Mr. Kirkpatrick, who made a warm speech, seconded by my father, W.W. Ferguson and many others of more mature mind exhorted the younger men, saying our revenge thus taken would so enrage these blood-thirsty savages that they would likely massacre many of the thousands of emigrants who were yet behind us. Instead they advised hitching up the teams and

getting out of Indian territory as speedily as possible. This we did, and soon we were again on our journey.”⁵²

Some young emigrants, who were at first willing participants in group efforts to punish Indians for acts of thievery or more serious offenses, grew to question their own actions, or resented the despicable behavior of others toward Native Americans. During his 1849 journey to California, shortly before reaching the sink of the Humboldt, eighteen-year-old Joseph Henry Merrill described the Shoshone Indians as having “some intelligence” and seeming to be a “good race.” Like hundreds of other overlanders, he also spoke of reports about Indians who would shoot oxen with arrows in order to render the beasts useless to the emigrants, and subsequently eat the meat after the overlanders had departed. “Some emigrants have revenged themselves by killing some Indians,” wrote Joseph Merrill, “and I believe this is a bad plan for us to adopt.”⁵³

A similar unsettling feeling came over eighteen-year-old John Steele during his 1850 journey to California when he volunteered to join a pursuit of Indians who had killed Edward Davis. Davis was on guard duty for his company in the same vicinity of the North Platte River where Steele and his companion were also on guard. The Indians had succeeded in driving away at least one third of the stock that Davis was protecting. With guns in hand, the pursuing group, uncertain whether they would surprise the Indians or be surprised themselves, proceeded to follow the hoofprints of the cattle, and were ordered to obey their leader under all circumstances. After sighting smoke from a nearby grove, the leader ordered his men to charge the Indian camp, hoping to kill the murderers and retrieve the cattle. Yet, what the revenge-seekers encountered were not fierce warriors but old Indian men and children who

clung to their mothers in terror. There was no resistance from this downtrodden group of Indians and all of them in the camp expected immediate annihilation. But as John Steele clearly recalled, “not a shot was fired . . . we could not think of laying hands on these helpless and innocent beings. . . . They were in more wretched and destitute condition than any I had hitherto seen.”⁵⁴ The older men and women in the impoverished camp understood what the white men wanted, and pointed to a mountain range where they might locate the murderer.⁵⁵ The defenseless Indians most likely revealed the information because their lives were spared, and John Steele and the others moved on in an effort to complete their mission. But, the incident left a troubling impression on the mind of a young boy whose insights seemed complex and beyond his chronological age.

When the family of eleven-year-old John Rogers James reached the Elkhorn River in eastern Nebraska in 1851, a shallow but deceptively swift tributary of the Platte River, ferrying emigrants across was a Mormon monopoly at that time. John’s father, Samuel, paid the fee of one dollar per wagon for assistance across the river. But when the company reached Shell Creek the next day, further payments were exacted by the Pawnees who demanded a more valuable tribute. The men of the train agreed to let the Indians have one of their five cherished milk cows, named old Spaney by the children, and some flour in return for a passage across the creek. John recalled with horror how the Indians “immediately slaughtered the cow for food and cut it up in pieces before their very eyes. These were serious losses for father and nothing short of tragedies for the children, for they nursed a close affection for all animals and especially for milch cows.”⁵⁶

Despite such trauma, many young emigrants experienced kind treatment and

were grateful for the necessary assistance provided by Native Americans during their months on the trail. Young overlanders also observed adults in their trains who treated Indians with mutual respect and others who were brutally cruel to native peoples. Children often expressed pride when their parents respected the Indians who inhabited the land they were crossing. Such was the case with William, John and James Barlow who traveled to Oregon in 1845 with a five thousand strong company, of which two-thirds were women and children. The boys' father was captain of their wagon train, one of the first large companies to cross the continent. The responsibilities of such an immense undertaking weighed heavily on the mind of the elder Barlow. In dealing with the Indians along the route, he chose to befriend native peoples in an effort to avoid potential deadly conflict. William remembered with pride how his father stopped and talked with the Indians along the route, offering them tobacco in peace. "He would go to their camps, call for their chief, get down off his saddle and give his horse and lariat to the chief, who would send him out with some young boy to good grass. . . .He would talk, smoke and eat with the chief, but if the old gent had sneaked off and tried to hide, the Indians would most likely have stolen his horse and maybe killed him. But this did not happen."⁵⁷

In 1846, when fourteen-year-old Octavius Pringle set out with a horse and two other young men to retrieve provisions for his stranded family, he soon learned that his companions decided not to make the return trip. A dreadful fear came over Octavius at the inception of the 125 mile return trip over the mountain range that separated his stranded family and the Willamette Valley. The youth knew that he would be traveling through wild country and that he would be at the mercy of the weather, wild animals and Indians. Discovering an Indian camp while on his journey back to his family,

Octavius, sensing that it would be impossible for him to hide, bravely decided to approach the tents of the Indians. He saw that they were occupied by women and children and he was informed that the men were out hunting. Remembered Octavius, the Indian women “took care of my things and myself as though I had been a brother . . . when the men returned, they treated me as royally as I had been a prince.”⁵⁸ The weary white boy stayed the night in the corner of a tent that had been designated for him, and he subsequently returned to his desperate family with the essential provisions. He related the pleasant story of Indian assistance to his mother who had been tormented by her decision to let him go in the first place, and who feared that her son had been captured and tortured by the “wild savages.”⁵⁹

Many emigrants spoke about similar situations whereby the very people whom they feared turned out to provide invaluable assistance to them when it was most needed. In 1848, Frances Adams, mother of four-year-old Inez Eugenia Adams and nine-month-old Helen, had the responsibility of getting the girls safely down a mountain side when their train attempted to descend one of the most dangerous slopes of the Cascade Mountains. Inez recounted that her mother took Helen down first and laid her in an area far from the road where she thought the child would be safe. Frances then hastened back up the slope to retrieve Inez when she encountered about a dozen Indians on horseback. Hysterically, she grabbed the hand of Inez and flew down the mountain where a group of Indians had surrounded Helen and appeared to be trampling her defenseless baby to death. Yet, Frances arrived breathless and was stunned to find the Indians in a circle around the child, protecting her until the return of her mother. “Speechless and well-nigh fainting, ” remembered Inez, “she motioned her thanks and they nodded, smiled and rode away.”⁶⁰

In a like manner, five-year-old Christian Lynhaa Christensen was amazed at the way the Sioux, who had been traveling parallel along the Platte River with the Christensen train, sympathized with his widowed mother and his three-year-old brother after the family had suffered the death of husband and father. While on his way to Utah in 1860, Niels Christensen had been accidentally shot and killed by a fellow traveler. He was quickly buried on the banks of the North Platte in a coffin of burlap sacks in a grave marked only with a buffalo skull for a gravestone.

Remembered Christian, “It was wonderful to see the sympathy and pity and weeping for my Mother by large husky women of the Great Sioux Nation, who had befriended us out in the wilderness on the plains of Nebraska.”⁶¹

Doubtless, however, the most valuable assistance provided to overlanders by Native Americans was aiding them in crossing the numerous rivers and streams along the trail and piloting Oregon-bound emigrants down the treacherous Snake and Columbia Rivers. Countless diaries and reminiscences contain information about Native Americans who saved the lives of many emigrants by helping them with their wagons, children and animals. For the 1846 Donner-Reed Party, the first Indians they encountered were members of the Kaw tribe who controlled the only ferry at the Kaw River in Kansas. “I watched them closely,” remembered twelve-year-old Virginia Reed Murphy, “hardly daring to draw my breath, and feeling sure they would sink the boat in the middle of the stream, and was very thankful when I found out they were not like grandmas Indians.”⁶² Likewise, 1852 pioneer Abigail Jane Scott developed a more positive view of Indians as her journey progressed. In May, Abigail commented about seeing many Indians, and she described them as “the most despicable looking objects my eyes ever beheld.” But by September, when the Scotts came to the

Deshutes of the Falls River in Oregon, they were in need of Indian boatmen to pilot their wagons across the river. Abigail, by then six months into her journey, spoke about the skillful way the Indians took all the females of her train across the river in canoes, and that her father willingly paid the four dollar fee for that service.⁶³ And, when eleven-year-old John Rogers James recounted the manner in which the Indian pilots who assisted his family on the Columbia River he wrote, “here is where the Indian is seen at his best, pulling and paddling a boat up the swift current of a forceful stream. With steady stroke and keen eyes for hazards, he missed nothing.”⁶⁴

Traveling west with her husband and two small children in 1862, Clara Witter was impressed by how relatively smooth their journey had been until the family reached Loup Fork in Nebraska, a tributary of the Platte River. The water was cold and chunks of ice floated on the surface of the stream. Clara and her husband Daniel wondered how they were going to get the children safely across when a Pawnee arrived and offered to help the family. She thought that this Indian surely must be “civilized” because of his overture of assistance. The Witters consented to accept the generous offer made by the Indian. Daniel Witter and the Pawnee then “took the horses and wagons over and came back for us, father [Clara referred to her husband as father] carrying one of the children and the Indian the other. We asked him how much and he said ‘thread and needle,’ so I gave him a spool of thread and some needles.”⁶⁵

During the early trail years the Indians tolerated and even welcomed white emigrants because of the trade items that they brought. Yet, brutality was a reality of trail life, and both overlanders and Native Americans were aggressors and victims. Most overlanders felt relatively safe during the early migration years, with the exception of those who traveled the Applegate Trail, or southern route into Oregon.

This section of the trail had developed a dangerous reputation from its inception in 1845. In the following year, diarist Lester Hulin was a member of a company which decided to take the newly-opened route. The trail was often deceptive, noted Hulin, since emigrants would travel for days across the desert without encountering any human habitation. Members of his company were suddenly attacked and young Ann Davis was struck by two arrows that passed through her body, one through her arm and the other through her side. She was cooking over an evening campfire when disaster struck. Ann lived, but she suffered miserably while traveling in a jolting wagon over rocky roads for the remainder of the journey.⁶⁶ Although this episode occurred early in the overland migration story and involved a young innocent girl, such scenes became routine on the Applegate Trail, and emigrants learned to utilize the route with caution.

Native Americans also experienced savagery at the hands of white emigrants. The most notorious case of an emigrant's arrogant and brutish behavior toward an Indian was witnessed by seven-year-old Benjamin Franklin Bonney and the other members of his train. In 1845, the Bonneys and seven other families whose original destination was Oregon, were persuaded by mountain man Caleb Greenwood at Fort Bridger to head for California. The third family to join the newly formed California-bound emigrants was Texan Jim Kinney, a man who possessed a violent temper. When the train reached the sagebrush desert region along the Humboldt River in Nevada, they were passing through Paiute country, Indians whom emigrants derisively referred to as "Digger Indians." On a day when Kinney's wagon was in the lead, he stopped the entire train after seeing an Indian in some brush near the trail. He retrieved a pair of handcuffs from his wagon with the intention of taking the Indian for his

personal slave. There were pleas for restraint by fellow travelers who feared that his actions would result in reprisal attacks, but their efforts were unsuccessful. Everyone was afraid of this enormous Texan who bragged about killing at least two other men and “plenty of negros,” and who threatened to kill anyone who tried to stop him. Company regulations were weakened after the split at Fort Bridger, but this was a man who did not comply with rules anyway.⁶⁷

So, without interference, Kinney knocked the Indian to the ground, put the handcuffs on him, dragged him by a rope fastened around his neck, and tied him to the back of a light carriage. Resisting, the Indian threw himself on the ground and was dragged by the neck while Kinney slashed him with a whip to “break his spirit.” This continued for several days until Kinney untied the Indian, feeling secure that his dog would pick up his trail if by chance he were to escape. After nearly three weeks, the Indian disappeared and, among other things, he had taken Kinney’s expensive Kentucky rifle. His “man Friday” was gone, and Kinney was furious. He immediately made an effort to track the Indian with his dog, but returned to camp without success. “Everyone in the train rejoiced,” recounted Benjamin, “but not a person dared to express sympathy for the Indian for fear of being killed if they showed any satisfaction.”⁶⁸

Clearly, members of the Bonney train sympathized with this Indian, but, in general, emigrants berated the Paiute, or Digger Indians, who acquired their name because their primary diet came from vegetable roots. They were most offensive to overlanders due to their poverty-stricken appearance, and were numerically weaker than the more powerful tribes of the plains. Eighteen-year-old John Steele’s portrayal of the Digger Indians in 1853 was one of the most charitable when he described them

as “not so well-formed,” and that many of them were “dressed in the cast-away clothing of the emigrants.”⁶⁹ That same year, fifteen-year-old Rachel Taylor had nothing kind to say about most Native Americans, but, to her, the Digger Indians were exceedingly repulsive. “They are a filthy thieving race, and would not scruple to take a person’s life if it could be done without risking their own,” wrote Rachel. Her attitude toward Indians reflected the tone of many young emigrants, and her feelings remained consistently negative throughout the journey.⁷⁰

In a few cases, perception’s like Rachel Taylor’s contributed to young overlanders blaming any unusual occurrence during their journeys on Indians, or, in extreme cases, faking Indian trouble in their trains. Early in their journey, Rachel and a friend, Mary Royal, went for a stroll along one of the Platte River bluffs near where they had been camped for the evening. Over a ridge, the girls sighted something moving, and immediately assumed that it could be nothing but an Indian. They hurried to relay the dreadful news to the men of their train who rashly grabbed their guns, mounted their horses, and rode off to prevent possible Indian trouble. The “Indian” turned out to be a man from their own company who was retrieving water from a nearby stream. Because of the false alarm, Rachel and Mary received their share of teasing from company members who found their false alarm humorous.⁷¹ Likewise, two young boys traveling west in 1850 with the family of Margaret White Chambers, caused hysteria in their train when they came into camp from guard duty and reported that they had become frightened by Indians who were lurking in the vicinity. Their story too was a false alarm and, according to Margaret, some in their company felt that the boys simply had become tired or bored with their duty and “they thought they would get up a little excitement.” But most of the adults in Margaret’s train failed to

see humor in the juvenile prank.⁷²

During the early part of the 1850s, Native Americans were becoming increasingly overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of emigrants who crossed their lands and brought disease and death. Isolated skirmishes that resulted in fatalities escalated, and some stretches of the trails were more dangerous than others, most notably beyond South Pass. Still, most overlanders experienced little trouble with Indians largely due to the 1851 Treaty of Fort Laramie which marked boundaries for specific tribes, and permitted the United States government to build military forts and construct roads in order to provide safe travel for emigrants.⁷³ Although the treaty was signed by numerous Indian tribes, the trails along the Platte River moved directly through the prime hunting ground of most plains tribes. It soon became apparent that these tribes did not realize what it meant to be under the jurisdiction of the government and to be restrained by boundaries that restricted their hunting practices.⁷⁴

Antagonism between Native Americans and white emigrants reached a new level of intensity during the 1850s, and reports of Indian depredations were convoluted and difficult to sort out. Evidence was mounting, however, that Indian trouble was real and that all segments of the trail were becoming increasingly dangerous. An example of the escalation that involved young emigrants occurred in 1855 in the train of James Enos. After departing Fort Laramie, the Enos company divided into four trains of ten wagons each since bands of Indians allegedly were burning grass for miles on each side of the trail. Persons in charge of livestock were compelled to take the animals further from the road to obtain an adequate amount of feed, remembered fourteen-year-old James Enos. Thus, some wagon trains became smaller and more spread out, which made overlanders more vulnerable to Indian assault despite protection from

soldiers.⁷⁵

James Enos set out to secure a horse and to herd the remaining stock into camp. On his return trip, he met his six-year-old sister and another young girl from the train who were in search of a stray cow. The girls found the cow and were in the process of milking the animal when a band of about thirty Sioux descended on them. The father of James Enos heard the piercing screams of his daughter and her companion, and rushed to rescue the children who were in flight for their lives. Reaching the girls before the Indians could, Enos managed to lift his six-year-old daughter safely on his horse and return her to camp and the arms of her mother. He did not escape unscathed, however, for he received a lance blow to his head which he ignored in order to quickly return for the other child. The Indians proceeded to separate the horses from the oxen in an attempt to steal the stock, while one member of the band went in pursuit of the child. The warrior found her lying in tall grass, but when he tried to carry her off, she bravely thrashed him in the head with her milk pail. This angered the Indian who speared the child seven times and left her supposedly dying.⁷⁶

With cattle stampeding, the Indians then attacked the camp of the unprepared emigrants and successfully made off with enough stock to cripple the train. This was a severe setback for members of the company who realized that they would be unable to retrieve the animals from the strong and defiant Sioux. After the tumultuous raid ceased, it was learned that the young girl who had been speared had made her way back to camp, and that she would survive her wounds. The next morning members of the despondent train discarded all unnecessary provisions, constructed carts from the hind wheels of wagons, yoked up cows in the place of oxen, and moved on.

Remembered James Enos, “It was the work of a moment. . . . My father retained his animosity toward the Sioux to the latest moment of his life and my sister has ever afterward trembled in fear at the sight of a red man.”⁷⁷

As Native American resentment increased, emigrants who went west during the later part of the 1850s and the 1860s did so with greater risk, although many did not realize it. “Had the Indians met the small precedent-setting caravans of the early 1840s with the same hostility they later demonstrated, it is doubtful that overlanders would have subsequently streamed westward in the numbers they did,” wrote historian John D. Unruh, Jr.⁷⁸ Since the westward migration was comprised of families, it was inevitable that young emigrants would be caught up in Indian-emigrant conflicts. When overlanders lost their lives at the hands of Native Americans, emigrants and newspaper reporters referred to such events as “Indian Massacres,” an oftentimes misleading term. Some of the most notorious of these accounts were The Whitman Massacre of 1847, The Ward Massacre of 1854, The Utter-Van Ornum Massacre of 1860, and the Plum Creek Massacre of 1864. When Indians died at the hands of white emigrants, the events were rarely reported in the East, and thus the savage image was perpetuated for a new generation of Americans.

When Dr. Marcus and Narcissa Whitman established their Methodist mission at Waiilatpu in 1837, near the present-day site of Walla Walla, Washington, they did so with the dual goals of converting members of the Cayuse Tribe and replacing their semi-nomadic lifestyle with a settled agricultural one, in order to prepare them for the certain progression of “civilization” to come.⁷⁹ But, by the mid 1840s, the Whitmans had become disillusioned with their missionary efforts, and after eleven years of labor, not one member of the Cayuse had converted to Christianity.⁸⁰ The Indians resented

not only the missionary presence, but also the fact that the Whitmans benefited economically by cultivation of the most valuable sections of their land. The missionaries, on the other hand, believed that “this material progress symbolized the superiority of the white civilization and its work ethic,” wrote historian Julie Roy Jeffrey in her biography of Narcissa Whitman.⁸¹ Like other mission residents, twelve-year-old Catherine Sager Pringle failed to understand the lack of appreciation on the part of the Indians who could seemingly only benefit from Dr. Whitman’s religious and agricultural contributions and his “unselfishness” in such efforts.⁸²

In addition to ministering to the Indians, Marcus and Narcissa Whitman contributed to the westward migration and the permanent settlement of Oregon by provisioning emigrants on their way west. Some of the young emigrants who arrived at the Whitman mission before the 1847 Uprising sensed that there was growing animosity among the Cayuse. Richard Watson Helm was a six-year-old child when his family wintered at the Dalles near the Whitman mission before moving on to Oregon City the following spring. He remembered that his father perceived that tensions between Indians and white emigrants were rising and that members of the Cayuse tribe were in a “surly mood.”⁸³ That same year, when seven-year-old Jesse Applegate arrived at Fort Walla Walla, he noted that these Indians, who had been living among whites for a period of time, had modified their dress and manner to accommodate the culture of the settlers and missionaries. If there was hostility on the part of the Indians, Jesse did not feel it, yet he sensed an uneasy intolerance among the whites toward the Indians. Remembered the youth, “some of the emigrants were prejudiced against Indians of whatever kind and were annoyed by the familiarity assumed by them in their intercourse with whites. . . . We boys were more or less tinctured with this

prejudice.”⁸⁴

Elizabeth Ann Fenn Coonc recalled how, in 1847, Dr. Whitman had traveled a distance of 150 miles to meet the weary travelers of her wagon train after they had descended the Blue Mountains in Oregon. The young girl’s train had recently been robbed by Indians who were still at the site when Whitman’s relief force arrived, and the natives were “wrapped in blankets with their warpaint on.” After the doctor had scolded the Indians, their “guilty consciences were awakened,” remembered Elizabeth, and utensils intermittently began to drop from under their blankets. When one of the Indians threw down a frying pan with considerable force, Elizabeth then knew that her father, John Fenn, recognized their hostility toward the missionary. So, when Whitman attempted to encourage the Cooncs to winter at the mission, John Fenn graciously declined the offer and continued on for Oregon City. As a result of his fortuitous decision, this Oregon-bound train barely escaped the deadly violence that occurred just weeks after their departure.⁸⁵

Unlike other Indian-emigrant tragedies which resulted from the later and more intrusive migration, the Whitman Massacre occurred early. The Cayuse Indians were a tribe with strong traditions who were expert horse breeders and hunters. They had already been exposed to Europeans through the Hudson’s Bay Company at Fort Vancouver, with whom they traded their prized horses. The employees of the fur company, primarily Roman Catholic, had already religiously influenced the Cayuse Indians before the Whitmans’ arrival at Fort Walla Walla. The native population was by this time seriously diminished by Old World diseases that had passed through the area. Seven years prior to the arrival of the Whitmans, another devastating epidemic, referred to as “fever or ague,” and later diagnosed as malaria, had infiltrated the area

and wiped out many of the Indians of the lower Columbia and Willamette valleys within a span of four years.⁸⁶

So, when the last emigrant train that had received assistance from the Whitmans pulled out of the mission in the fall of 1847, and a deadly measles epidemic struck, conditions were ripe for a violent uprising. The Indians once again had no immunities to fight a deadly contagious disease, and their traditional cure of sweating followed by a plunge into cold water, only contributed to more deaths. To prove that the whites had contracted the disease as well, Narcissa, who had been administering to the sick and dying for weeks, showed the Indians the body of six-year-old Salvijane Osborn who had died from the illness. But death continued to claim hundreds of Indian lives which only increased the spread of terror and their hatred toward whites.⁸⁷

Marcus Whitman was aware of the jeopardy that he was in and so he decided to abandon the mission in the upcoming spring. But it was too late because the Cayuse elders had become convinced that Whitman had deliberately poisoned them by practicing witchcraft. Thus, on November 29, 1847, Marcus and Narcissa Whitman and eleven others were brutally murdered by vengeful Cayuse. John Sager and Mary Ann Bridger, daughter of mountain man Jim Bridger, were in the mission house and witnessed the slaying of Whitman. Twelve-year-old John Sager reached for a pistol when he too was killed by one of the two Cayuse men who had killed Whitman. After John was shot, his throat was slit and he suffered a slow and agonizing death. Mary Ann fled in terror, but she died from sickness just a few months later. The other emigrant women and children in the mission house hid behind doors.⁸⁸

The family of Josiah and Margaret Osborne had been at Waiilatpu just four

weeks prior to the Indian attack and were one of the families compelled to take refuge inside the house. The Osbornes were the parents of the six-year-old girl who had died of the measles and had been presented before the Indians only five days before the attack. Along with the remaining members her family, Nancy Osborne Jacobs was in the mission house when the Indians attacked Whitman, and she vividly remembered how her father hurriedly latched the door of their room and concealed his family beneath some loose boards of the floor. "In a few moments," recounted Nancy, "our room was full of Indians talking and laughing as if it had been a holiday."⁸⁹ The Osbornes remained fear-stricken, listening to the moans of the dying, while at the same time, Nancy's mother struggled to keep her ill two-year-old son Alex still. After dark, the family escaped and made their way to the Walla Walla River. Josiah Osborne carried his family one at a time across the river and made the decision to take his four-year-old son, John, who was also sick, to Fort Walla Walla and then return for his family. "Such a parting as that was. I hope I shall never witness the like again," remembered Nancy.⁹⁰ Ironically, it was an Indian who guided Osborne back to the banks of the Walla Walla River and assisted him in locating his family.⁹¹

The other children present at the mission on that day were in the schoolhouse where they took refuge in a loft above the school room. Their schoolmaster was killed when he fled in an attempt to get help for the children. Shortly thereafter, the Indians found the terror-filled children and lined them up in front of the schoolhouse. Because ten-year-old Eliza Spaulding understood the language of the Cayuse and heard the Indians discussing the children's fate, she covered her face with her apron so that she would not have to see the Indians shoot her.⁹² When fourteen-year-old Francis Sager tried to comfort his younger sister Matilda, he was killed instantly.⁹³ But the rest of the

children were taken captive for thirty days, during which time Hannah Sager and Helen Meek, daughter of Oregon pioneer Joseph Meek, died from measles. The lives of the remaining captives were exchanged for provisions.⁹⁴

Two years after the massacre, five Cayuse Indians surrendered to the whites so that tribal members could return safely to their beloved land. The five men were tried in Oregon City and hanged by Joseph Meek. Two children who were present at the hangings were Jane Straight Bingham and David Caufield. For Jane, one of the most vivid recollections of her childhood was seeing the Indians who had murdered Dr. Whitman and his party “hanging there with black caps over their heads on the gallows at Oregon City.”⁹⁵ The same was true for David Caufield who never forgot witnessing Joseph Meek drop the trap doors for the five Indians being hanged. He remembered that “a crowd gathered from all over the Willamette Valley” for the event.⁹⁶ The massacre marked the end of the Methodist missionary effort in Oregon, and the children who resided at the mission were taken in by various families in the region.

The emigration that the Whitmans had promoted clearly swelled after their deaths and, as the trails became crowded with white overlanders, the attitudes of most Native Americans toward emigrants shifted from tolerance to resentment. Violence increased when Indians felt their lifestyles disrupted and their existence threatened. While the Whitmans brought intrusive religious and agricultural practices, the emigrants that followed them brought deadly cholera, alcohol and the slaughter of the buffalo. They introduced weapons that created a dependence on the white man which resulted in havoc among Indian tribes; they camped on Indian land and cut trees for fuel; they depleted grasslands; they demanded military protection which resulted in more killings of both Indians and whites; and they eventually brought the railroads and

more settlers. Slowly, Native Americans realized the catastrophic effect which white emigration placed on their way of life and the trails became more dangerous. The Ward Massacre, the Utter-Van Orman Massacre and the Plum Creek Massacre, along with other lesser events, were the direct results of the stress that large numbers of whites placed on Indian culture.

Young emigrants who were caught up in these deadly conflicts experienced the worst of their preconceived fears and their attitudes toward Native Americans were shaped forever. In 1854, eight-year-old Mary Perry departed Garden Grove, Iowa, with her family, intending to go no further west than Nebraska. But the Perrys fell in with a large wagon train that was bound for Oregon and so her father decided to continue the trip. In late August, the company was compelled to split into three sections since the Snake or Shoshoni Indians had allegedly burned the grass in order to starve and weaken the emigrant trains. Despite pleas from fellow travelers to remain on the main road, the first group, composed of a small five-wagon group known as the Ward train, chose to take a route that was not heavily traveled and lacked timber for cover. They were followed by the second and largest segment of wagons under the command of Alexander Scott Yantis. The Perrys were members of the last and smallest group to depart White Horse Creek in Idaho. Not an hour had passed after these last overlanders pulled out when a small group of unarmed and seemingly friendly Indians stopped the train to trade. They were followed by a larger segment of mounted and armed Shoshonis, who, upon learning that the travelers had no whiskey, opened fire on the small train of four wagons, killing Mary's uncle instantly and fatally wounding her father. Mary watched her father agonizingly linger in a jolting wagon for four days, begging for someone to kill him, after which time he

mercifully died.⁹⁷

Just hours after burying Perry, the emigrants came upon the dreadful sight of the Ward train whose members, with the exception of two young boys, were brutally killed by the same Indians that had attacked the Perry train. In this case, however, the deaths resulted after a white emigrant killed an Indian who was attempting to take a horse. Captain Alexander Yantis and seven other men of the second section of wagons approached the Ward train while the Indians were in the process of pillaging their wagons, but after one of their members was killed, the men were forced to retreat and leave the women and children to their fate. The ground was covered with blood and the stench from the nineteen dead and mutilated bodies was appalling, remembered Mary Perry, who helped members of her party with the sad task of digging trenches for their murdered companions.⁹⁸ A train of Wisconsin emigrants also arrived at the scene of the tragedy shortly after the killings. Emigrant Jacob Ebey recorded, “everything showed signs of a hard fight . . . we got out our spades and some of us stoped and gave them a decent burial.”⁹⁹

It was later learned that the pregnant Mrs. Ward was forced to observe the deaths of her children before she too was dismembered. Fourteen-year-old William Ward was shot through his lung with an arrow, but managed to crawl twenty-five miles on his hands and knees to Fort Boise. There the arrow was extracted and he survived. His brother, nine-year-old Newton, was left in the brush for dead until he was found and rescued by Alexander Yantis who returned to the site. The Ward brothers did not find each other for thirty years, according to Sarah Catherine Koontz, daughter of rescuer Yantis.¹⁰⁰

The Ward tragedy of 1854 was evidence that relationships between Indians and

white emigrants were deteriorating, but it was the 1860 Utter-Van Orman disaster, which also occurred along Snake River Country, that caused greater anxiety for future overlanders and reinforced the demand for increased military protection. In 1860, fourteen-year-old C.B. Wiley, along with his parents, six siblings and the Norton family, left his home in Wisconsin and struck out for the Willamette Valley. The Wiley-Norton train was intermittently plagued by Indian troubles along the Snake River ever since their departure from Fort Hall. When they were attacked by a large group of Indians, the travelers managed to quickly corral their wagons and resist the assault. Remembered Wiley, “we were ready for them so they gave us up as a bad job.”¹⁰¹

Not so fortunate were members of the Utter, Van Orman, Myers and Chase families who were traveling directly behind the Wileys and Nortons. The 1860 company consisted of forty-four members, of which twenty-three were under the age of eighteen.¹⁰² Because three trains had been attacked along the Snake River the previous year, the army established a limited escort system for emigrant trains. So, when thirteen-year-old Emeline Trimble, daughter of Abagel Trimble Utter and stepdaughter of company leader Elijah Utter, learned that soldiers would travel with the company through the dangerous Snake country, her fears of Indians were diminished. The dragoons, however, were under orders to escort the Utter train for just six days beyond Fort Hall at which point the emigrants were assured that troops were on the roads from army posts in Oregon and Washington who would provide further assistance.¹⁰³

But, as Emeline recounted years later, the families had traveled only a short distance without protection before they encountered the grave of an emigrant man who

was a member of a train that had preceded the Utters. Near his burial site was a board upon which was written an account of his murder at the hands of Indians, and it warned emigrants to be alert and exercise extreme caution. The Indians allegedly dug up the shallow grave, took the man's clothing, and reburied him "leaving one hand and one foot out of the grave."¹⁰⁴ Less than a mile beyond the scene, the Utter-Van Orman train was attacked by the Indians who had dealt a blow to the Wileys and Nortons. Unlike most Indian attacks, which were generally a swift hit and run on a train that was spread out, this was a two-day sustained assault, and, contrary to popular folklore, one of a few attacks made by Indians against an encircled wagon train. The disaster resulted in more emigrant deaths and unfathomable suffering than any other Indian tragedy along the trail.¹⁰⁵

Because the families were forced to make a dry camp atop a hill, it was not long before the children and animals were suffering for water. In the ensuing conflict, eleven overlanders, including Emeline's Father Elijah and stepsister Mary Utter, were killed immediately. After Elijah Utter's death, Abagail Utter would not leave her husband despite pleas made by Emeline and other emigrants who recognized that their only chance for survival was to abandon the wagons and attempt to escape on foot. Courageously the thirteen-year-old took one last look at her mother's face and made the decision to take a nursing baby and four younger Utter children and flee with the other survivors. Seven men, five women and sixteen children, including Emeline's ten-year-old brother Christopher Trimble, her stepbrothers, twelve-year-old Charles Utter and eleven-year-old Henry Utter, left the train on foot while the Indians were ransacking the wagons.¹⁰⁶

The emigrants traveled by moonlight and hid in willows during the day. It was

agonizing for Emeline to hear the children cry for their mother and father, and worse yet, to hear them cry for food when there was none to give them. After three weary nights of travel, the emigrants made camp at the Owyhee River near Fort Boise where the decision was made to roast the dogs of the Utter and Van Ornum families rather than die of starvation. Denying herself, Emeline saved every morsel she received and distributed the food among her siblings. But, in spite of these efforts, Emeline's nine-year-old sister, Libbie Trimble, died, and within six days she also suffered the loss of her stepsister, Susan Utter, whom she had carried for over 100 miles. Recalling the pain of the experience, Emeline Trimble Fuller wrote: "I had suffered enough in the past few months to change me from a light-hearted child to a broken-hearted woman, and my wish was that I might lie down and die."¹⁰⁷

Along with Emeline, another hero of the Utter-Van Ornum tragedy was ten-year-old Christopher "Christy" Trimble, whose bravery bought time and provided food for other emigrants. The families sought relief in rude shelters that they had built while encamped at the Owyhee River. While Christy was fishing in the Snake River, three miles from the Owyhee, a group of Snake Indians saw him and followed him back to his camp. The men offered the stranded overlanders salmon in return for clothes and guns, and, recounted Maggie Myers, age seven at the time: "My mother was now wearing just her skirt and underwear, having exchanged her dress for food, the rest of the women and children being very scantily clad."¹⁰⁸

The Snakes wanted Christy to go with them to their camp, promising not to harm him, and also vowing to return with more provisions. The boy begged his sister to let him go with the Indians in order to induce them to bring food to the starving survivors. When the Indians returned with Christy, they were told by Joseph Myers

that if they were to take him again the youth would be retrieved by soldiers. But the word “soldiers” antagonized the distrustful Indians and Emeline Trimble never saw her brother again. While gathering fuel she heard distressful cries coming from the direction of the Snake camp, and she feared they were those of Christy. The following day Joseph Myers traced the path to the Indian camp where he found a piece of Christy’s hair. To her horror, Emeline learned that her brother had been killed by the Indians and that his body had been torn to pieces by wolves.¹⁰⁹

Before he knew that Christopher Trimble had been killed, and, believing that his chances of survival were better if his family departed the camp at the Owyhee River, Alexis Van Ornum, his wife, Abigail, and their five children and others, including Charles and Henry Utter, decided to leave the camp, hoping to find food and assistance. Tragically, however, Alexis and Abigail Van Ornum and the Utter brothers suffered barbarous deaths at the hands of Indians. Four of their children, Eliza, Minerva, Lucinda and Reuban, ranging in age from eight to fourteen-years-old, were taken captive by the Snakes. Indian agent John Owen was instructed to make every effort to rescue the children. The distraught Owen vigorously conducted the pursuit of the Van Ornum children, but at the same time revealed his sentiments about the Shoshone Indians in a letter that he sent to the Flathead Agency, Washington Territory in February 1861, in which he wrote that “These Indians twelve years ago were the avowed friends of the white man. I have had their young men in my employment as hunters and horse guides. . . . Their present hostile attitude can in great measure be attributed to the treatment they have received from unprincipled white men passing through their country . . . in fact outrages have been committed by white men that the heart would shudder to record.”¹¹⁰

The three girls were eventually killed or died of starvation, and Reuban's fate was unknown. Zachias Van Orman, the boy's uncle, spent two years and over five thousand dollars to rescue Reuban. When he was finally located by the army, the boy "was dressed and bedaubed with paint like an Indian and acted like a regular little savage . . . fighting, kicking and scratching when the paint was washed from him to determine his white descent," wrote a reporter from the California Napa County Reporter in 1862.¹¹¹ What became of Reuban Van Orman is not known. Edith Farmer Elliot, Zachias Van Ornum's granddaughter, revealed that her grandfather refused to keep the boy because of his intolerable behavior, and noted that family members had speculated that he found his way back to the Indians.¹¹²

Emeline Trimble and the remaining eleven members of the Myers and Chase families were finally found by army officer R.H. Anderson. "Suffice it to say," in the military report submitted by Captain Frederick Dent, "when found on the Owyhee they were living on the putrefied corpses of those who had died, and when found by us had consumed five human bodies."¹¹³ Of the forty-four members of the Utter-Van Ornum train, eleven had survived, and the army vowed to punish the Indians involved without delay.

But it was not just Indians who were responsible for attacking emigrant trains along the trails. When she told her story of the tragic events of the Ward Massacre years later, Mary Perry said that she "never entertained a doubt that the two men who led the Indians in the attack were white men as their manner, dress and talk indicated it. They wore good clothes and had their hands and faces and feet painted, which the Indians did not."¹¹⁴ So too Emeline Trimble Fuller recounted that "we all agreed that the leader among them must be a white man, as his dress and appearance was different

from the rest. He had a beard and you could see plainly that he was painted.”¹¹⁵

“White Indians,” according to John D. Unruh, Jr., were formidable adversaries of overlanders who disguised themselves as Indians and stole horses and mules to hasten their own westward advancement.¹¹⁶

By 1864, Indian raids along the trails became so deadly that they virtually shut down portions of the road. On August 8, approximately thirty miles west of Fort Kearny at Plum Creek on the south side of the Platte River, eleven teamsters were killed by a band of Cheyenne. A young woman, Nancy Jane Fletcher Morton, whose husband was killed, and a nine-year-old boy, Daniel “Danny” Marble, were seized and held in captivity by the Indians. Nancy endured incredible hardships before she was ransomed six months later. Fearing what horrors he might be forced to withstand, Danny Marble was determined to escape despite the fact that he could possibly face societal rejection after his association with Indians. During his time with Nancy Morton he told her that, “If I can escape, I will return to my mother, who, now that father is dead, needs the assistance of her oldest son; but if she casts any reproaches upon me for bondage under the Indians or for my father’s death, I will leave her forever.”¹¹⁷ Escape was not necessary, however, because a short time after he was taken captive, he was ransomed at Fort Union for trinkets, blankets and horses. Yet, Danny would never see his mother again. Soon after his release, he became fatally ill and died in Denver City.¹¹⁸

One month prior to the attack at Plum Creek, Josiah Kelly’s wagon train, consisting of only four wagons and eleven people, was assured by soldiers at Fort Laramie that the road was safe and the Indians were friendly. After the emigrants crossed the Little Box Elder stream in Wyoming, they ascended a slope where the road

leveled off and, without warning, were attacked by approximately 250 Sioux. When shots were fired, Josiah Kelly hid in some tall grass while his wife, Fanny, and ten-year-old adopted daughter Mary were carried off by the Indians. During the first hour of their captivity, Fanny planned an escape for Mary who was riding behind her on a horse. "We are only a few miles from our camp, and the stream we have crossed you can easily wade through," Fanny told Mary, "and I have dropped letters on the way . . . they will guide you back again and it may be your only chance of escape."¹¹⁹ Fanny Kelly told her Sioux captors that the child had fallen asleep and dropped from the horse. She was brutally punished for the loss of the child and warned not to attempt further escape. Mary spent the night alone on the prairie and found her way back to the trail. Soldiers from Fort Laramie who had passed the scene of the disaster noticed the small figure of a child in front of a ravine on a bluff overlooking the trail. The soldiers intended to rescue the girl but when a band of Indians rode up they feared the warriors had used her for a decoy and that the ravine might contain more Sioux. So, instead of trying to save her, they hurriedly fled to Deer Creek Station and related the story.¹²⁰

The following morning of July 14th Josiah Kelly persuaded some soldiers to return with him to the ravine in the hope of finding his daughter alive. Instead they found Mary's mutilated remains which revealed that she had been scalped and pierced by three arrows. "When discovered, her body lay with hands outstretched, as if she had received, while running, the fatal blows," wrote W.W. Morrison who, after four successive summers of searching between 1945 and 1949, felt confident that he had found the crossing where Mary Kelly fell to her death. Along with other researchers, he placed a wooden marker near the mound of rocks which previously marked the site

where the tragic event occurred.¹²¹

During later migration years, when it became clear that white emigration would not end and that the Native American way of life was vanishing, violence increased. The few young emigrants who experienced the worst of Indian depredations suffered tremendously. Still, they were a small percentage considering that over five hundred thousand overlanders participated in the migration. In his tally of fatal emigrant-Indian encounters between 1840 and 1860, historian John D. Unruh, Jr. found that 362 whites were killed, compared with 426 Indians.¹²² Overall, most emigrant-Indian contact was peaceful, despite frequent scares and fabrications, and young emigrants reflected this fact by their descriptions of Indian interaction. Fifteen-year-old Flora Isabelle Bender, a young emigrant who kept one of the most complete trail diaries for a girl her age and traveled during 1863, one of the more dangerous years, wrote in her final entry: “We have traveled over a long, lonely and dangerous road, have been blessed with health most of the way, found that savage race mostly harmless.”¹²³

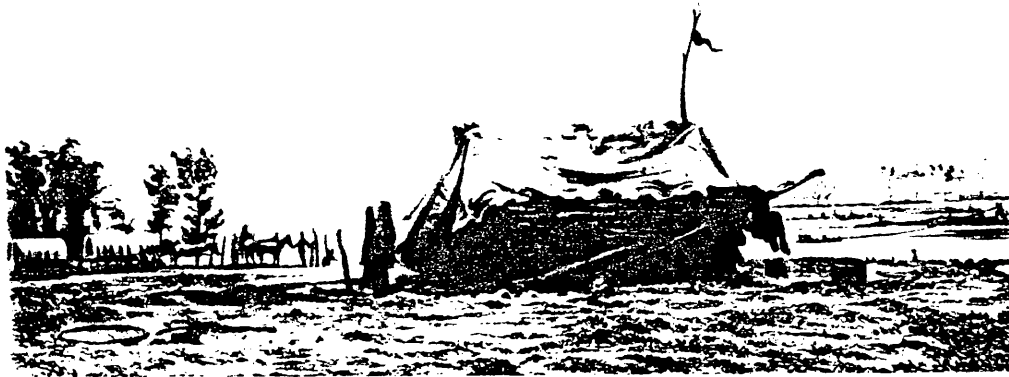


FIGURE 4

Loup Fork Crossing

Clara and Daniel Witter and their two children were assisted by a Pawnee man when they crossed Loup Fork, a tributary of the Platte River in Nebraska. In 1862, the water was cold and chunks of ice floated on the surface of the stream.

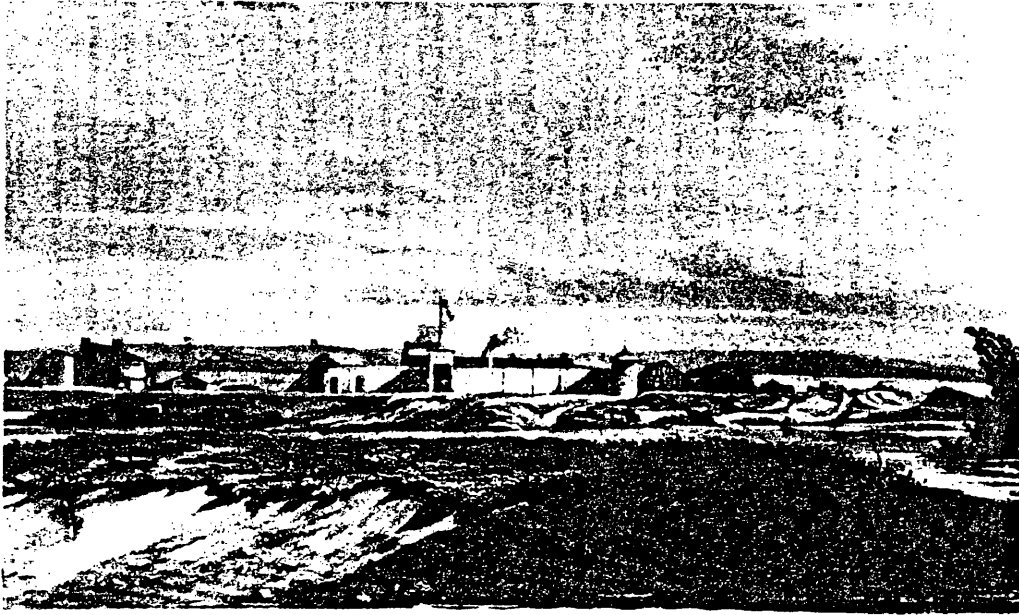


FIGURE 5

Fort Laramie

During early migration years Indians traded peacefully with emigrants at Fort Laramie. They also performed dances inside fort walls. In 1846, Lucy Henderson was terrified and fascinated by the spectacle. But as the emigration swelled, Indians resented white intrusion and overlanders who traveled during the mid-1850s and 1860s became more dependent on the soldiers at the fort for protection.



FIGURE 6

Laramie Peak

Laramie Peak loomed west of Fort Laramie and reminded emigrants that they were leaving the prairie and entering the difficult mountain phase of their journeys.

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CHAPTER FOUR

DISEASE AND DEATH

Sickness and Treatments on the Overland Trails

While we were traveling along the Platte River in June cholera broke out among the emigrants. Mother was among the first victims. We camped alone on the day she was first taken ill. Our train went on. . . . On June 24 at two o'clock in the afternoon mother died. I will draw a veil. It is too sad and sacred.¹

— Mary Medley Ackley: age ten at the time of her journey.

The dread word was “cholera.” Its mere utterance resulted in more anxiety among emigrants than any other threat associated with the western trails. It caused prospective emigrants to put dreams of the migration on hold, and others who had begun their journeys to abruptly turn around and return to their homes in the East. In late May and early June of 1852, a season in which cholera raged along the Platte River, at least four hundred wagons returned east.² Nine-year-old Mary Ellen Todd traveled to Oregon during that especially active period of trail migration, and found it demoralizing to witness entire families returning east, often with sick family members who were no longer able to cope with the effects of the debilitating disease.³ With regard to the cholera epidemic of 1849, overlander and physician Israel Lord wrote, “I speak of it as I saw it. It commenced with a diarrhea in every case . . . vomiting was the worst symptom, and in every case proved fatal where vomiting, purging, cramp, and cold and sweaty skin were present.”⁴ One year before the Todds traveled west,

twelve-year-old Marilla Washburn Bailey, an Illinois emigrant, reflected on the swiftness with which the deadly disease swept through her wagon train. Two days before the company had reached Chimney Rock, eleven emigrants were buried on a single day. Recounted Marilla, “a young man in our wagon train named Hyde went out as a guard for stock that night. When he left, after supper, he seemed perfectly well. When the guard was changed at midnight Mr. Wood brought his body back to the train. He had been taken with severe cramps and died within two hours.”⁵

Disease killed more emigrants traveling west than accidents, starvation, exposure and Indian attacks combined, and cholera claimed more lives than any other disease. Estimates of trail deaths from disease have varied considerably. Excluding the southern trails, historian Merrill Mattes accepted a mortality rate of six percent of those journeying west between 1842 and 1859, while historian John D. Unruh, Jr. believed a four percent figure to be more accurate.⁶ If Mattes’ conservative figure of 500,000 emigrants traveling west between those migration years at the five percent mortality average is used, it can be estimated that approximately 20,000 overland travelers died from disease between 1842 and 1859. Of the diseases that claimed emigrant lives, cholera was the most deadly. More cholera fatalities occurred between the Missouri River and Fort Laramie, the initial and otherwise least difficult phase of the journey, than any other section of the trails.⁷ After cholera, the chief afflictions for overlanders were scurvy and mountain fever, illnesses which emigrants often encountered beyond Fort Laramie. Other maladies such as diarrhea, measles, whooping cough, smallpox, mumps, tuberculosis and a host of other ailments which had plagued residents of the Mississippi River Valley, and had, in many cases, motivated them to head west, also caused tremendous suffering on the trails.⁸ Children

were more vulnerable to some sicknesses than adults because many of them had not yet experienced the communicable diseases of childhood and their bodies lacked sufficient immunities. Whether these children became ill, cared for the sick, lost family members, participated in burials, or merely witnessed how members of their companies reacted to contagious diseases, their personal observations and tragedies fit dramatically into the story of the great overland migration.

In the crowded camps of the Missouri River jumping-off towns, measles was the most common disease among children. John Farnsworth was thirteen-years-old in 1852 when his parents and six siblings traveled by boat down the Ohio River to St. Louis, and then by wagon train to St. Joseph. At the latter spot, all of the Farnsworth children came down with measles and the family was compelled to spend an unanticipated and uncomfortable few weeks before they were able to cross the Missouri River and continue on their way to California. "It was the worst luck," remembered John, "and we were stowed away in one room 12 x 16, without table, bedstead, or chair."⁹ When Daniel Witter returned to Indiana from Denver in 1859 to take his wife, Clara, and two small children west with him, the children were stricken with measles while the family laid over in Omaha. The Witters were fortunate to find an affordable room at the Herndon House, the only hotel in the jumping-off town, where they remained for three weeks so that the children could recover before resuming their long journey. There, Clara attended to her children and kept them warm by placing a jug of hot water in their feather beds, a procedure that was used by several other mothers tending to their sick children.¹⁰

But because it was cholera that claimed the most lives, it was cholera that generated the most hysteria. The spread of cholera in America followed the pattern

recorded in 1848 by London physician John Snow, when he wrote that “there are certain circumstances, however, connected with the progress of cholera. . . . It travels along great tracks of human intercourse, never going faster than people travel . . . in extending to a fresh island or continent, it always appears first at a sea-port.”¹¹

Because the Atlantic Ocean was a transportation route rather than a barrier to the American continent, European epidemics inevitably affected Americans. Cholera first appeared in the United States in 1832 with the arrival of immigrants from Europe. By 1833, the disease had spread as far west as St. Louis where, during June of that year, sixty deaths were recorded.¹² During the following month, cases were reported which were believed to have been carried by cholera-infested steamboats up the Mississippi River from New Orleans, and subsequently along the Missouri River to Kansas.

Although the disease reached frontier military posts and settlements, it suddenly and mysteriously disappeared from the American mainland during the mid-1830s and did not reappear until 1848.¹³

The course of the 1848-49 epidemic developed in the same manner as the 1832 epidemic in which, after it was reported in New York City, the next city to document cases was New Orleans. In the fall of 1848, two vessels departed for America from the German port of Le Havre, filled with approximately 600 immigrants. Both ships left the port with no recorded sickness and both remained free from disease until they were approaching the American shore. Ironically, at approximately the same time and in the same latitude, about a thousand miles apart, each ship experienced an outbreak of cholera among some steerage passengers, which led the captains of both ships to conclude erroneously that the outbreaks were the result of changes in atmospheric conditions. When the first vessel arrived in New York City, the deputy health officer

proceeded to inspect the 331 steerage passengers. Alarming, he found that seven people below deck were dead and others displayed unmistakable symptoms of cholera.¹⁴

One week after cholera was diagnosed among immigrants in New York, the second vessel arrived at New Orleans, also carrying immigrants infected with cholera. The mild climate of the southern city added to the rapidity with which the disease was carried to steamboat landings along the Mississippi River, and subsequently across the overland trails. Physicians later made the determination that the virus was brought onto the ships by some of the passengers' clothing, which may have been worn by people who suffered from the virus in Germany.¹⁵ Still, forty-three more years would elapse before significant health restrictions would be placed on the trans-Atlantic migration.¹⁶ In 1849, the communicable disease became a full-blown epidemic, with gold seekers adding to its inevitable spread. It would not be long before all of the overland trails would become infested during the heaviest years of migration.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the cause of cholera was still a mystery despite its prevalence earlier in the century. Both laymen and medical professionals attempted to guess the origins of the deadly scourge that struck with astounding suddenness and was most often fatal. Some of the more common theories included soiled clothes, improper diet, contaminated drinking water, overindulgence in alcohol, insect bites, contaminated soils and atmospheric conditions.¹⁷ By 1854, physician John Snow demonstrated how cases that broke out in central London could be traced to a single source of contaminated drinking water. But his theory could not be proven, and thirty years would elapse until the disease-causing germs were discovered. In 1883, Robert Koch found a new bacillus that accounted for cholera, even though his explanation

was met with considerable resistance for the remainder of the century.¹⁸ So, for the duration of the overland migration years, there was no commonly accepted explanation for the invasion and spread of the disease that wreaked incredible suffering among emigrants on the trails.

Once emigrants departed the Missouri River jumping-off towns, temporary housing and extended delays were not an option since it was crucial to cross the high plains and mountains before winter. It was difficult for travelers to be sick on the trails, or to watch a loved one suffer and deteriorate. Disease-ridden emigrants rode in jolting wagons during the day and slept on hard beds at night. Resources were limited, but others did what they could to relieve the suffering of the afflicted travelers. Mrs. Ellis Hendricks was eight-years-old when she traveled to Oregon in 1847. Her family arrived at St. Joseph and was preparing to cross the Missouri River when the girl's father suddenly became ill. His prognosis was poor and he was not expected to live. Yet, he had uprooted and moved his large family and he was therefore determined to make the journey or die on the way. Responding to his pleas, his wife and children built him a swinging bed inside of the family wagon to ease travel over rough roads.¹⁹

Isaac Hill was faced with a similar dilemma when he had to devise a way to transport his young daughter, Mary, who was stricken with cholera, across the Green River in Wyoming during their 1853 journey to Oregon. The river was deep and swift and her father was exhausted after making several trips to assist his family across, remembered eighteen-year-old Martha Hill, who was assigned the task of caring for her younger sister. Ingeniously, Hill rolled his sick daughter in a blanket and tied her between two wagon wheels which had been removed from the wagon and placed inside. Martha helped her father with the difficult task of rowing the floating wagon,

while at the same time trying to keep her sister dry and protected. By the time this last wagon reached the opposite shore of the Green River it was dark and the emigrants had drifted far from their landing site. Hill and a traveling companion still had to haul the wagon up the river bank and reassemble it, so Martha was responsible for guiding her weakened sister to the company campsite which was at least a mile away and visible only by the burning campfire. “Our way was strewn with logs, over which I helped my sister the best I could, often tearing our dresses on the low thick brush. At times my sister begged me to go on and leave her, as she could not go a step farther, and then we would sit down on some old log and rest,” recounted Martha. Mary Hill was bolstered by her sister’s resolve to reach the campsite, where their frightened mother was relieved to find her daughters safe and alive, and they, in turn, were thankful that she was spared the hardships they had endured.²⁰

Despite the fact that Mary Hill was weak and nauseous, she was coherent and capable of following the instructions of her older sister. Others who suffered from high fevers and sleeplessness often drifted in and out of delirium, a syndrome which frightened both children and adults, and was particularly taxing for traveling families. Hannah Tapfield King, who traveled with her husband and ten children to Salt Lake City in 1853, devoted a considerable part of her diary to her thirteen-year-old son, Thomas King, Jr., who suffered from fragile health. Her journal revealed that it was often frustrating for her to keep him content. Some nights Tom pleaded with his mother to wash him, and other nights he would wake up in a delirious state and become angry if she attempted to rub his body or to bathe him.²¹ When fifteen-year-old Flora Isabelle Bender’s train made camp just east of Salt Lake City in 1863, the emigrants had traveled an unusually long distance of twenty-seven miles that day. It

was an especially difficult night for a young boy traveling with the Benders who had been sick for several days. Wrote Flora, “tonight he had one of those spasms—he was all cramped up and imagined everyone was going to kill him or something of that sort . . . all the campers rushed right into our tent and I was frightened nearly to death.”²²

In June, 1849, four days would elapse from the time twelve-year-old Jonathon Hoover first complained of fatigue until he was dead. Initially, his complaints were attributed to the heavy work he had done when he had helped pull wagons through the thick sandy soil near Ash Hollow. But, when he began to deteriorate at an unusually rapid pace, his family soon realized that Johnnie’s condition was more serious than mere exhaustion. By the following day he had suffered severe cramps, could no longer walk, and was “reduced down to a skeleton,” wrote his brother, Vincent.²³ As was the case with so many families, the Hoovers, despite Johnnie’s pain, made the decision to keep moving and stay with their train. Wrought with diarrhea and an insatiable thirst, the boy begged his father to stop and camp, which he at last did. Johnnie became worse and by four o’clock that afternoon, he was delirious. Wrote Vincent, “he would rol and kick off the cover . . . and upon Father putting it on him, he would hollow and say that there was a dead man and a dead ox in the sheet.”²⁴ Within one hour Johnnie could barely breathe and by six o’clock he was pronounced dead. He was traveling with his father, brother and three sisters who were eager to reach the California. But the sudden and painful death of a family member put a damper on their dreams of gold. Their spirits crushed, they buried son and brother on the prairie before sundown and carved an epitaph on a simple pine board marker which read, “Rest in Peace, Sweet Boy, Thy Troubles Are Over.”²⁵

An incident which frightened emigrants traveling with a company under the leadership of William Clark occurred when Clark himself became delirious, remembered nine-year-old Mary Ellen Todd. When the Todds approached Fort Hall in 1852, Abbot Todd elected to leave the large train and join a smaller train headed by Clark. His wife, Angelina, was sick and Todd thought that it would be easier for her to travel with a smaller company. When the overlanders approached the Snake River for the last of several crossings, many of them were sick, including Mary Ellen. During the river crossing, the Clark family, which included three young boys, needed considerable assistance in constructing boats if they were to survive the crossing. Mary Ellen's father was one of many men who provided invaluable assistance to them. Unfortunately, the boys' mother died in the boat that her sons and some of the other men had made for her. Nine-year-old Jesse Clark was extremely sad, remembered Mary Ellen, "I saw him pass by with tears rolling down his face."²⁶ Still, the boy was relieved that his mother would no longer have to jolt over rough and rocky roads. Members of the saddened company buried her on the banks of the Snake River and pressed on, when, after only five miles of travel, they heard screams from the back of the Clark wagon. Mary Ellen's father rushed to the scene where a feverish and delirious Clark unknowingly had taken a butcher knife to his son, Jesse's, throat. Todd calmed the hallucinating man and successfully restrained him from hurting his own son. Abbot Todd then sent Jesse Clark to drive the Todd wagon, while he drove the other wagon for the fearful Clark boys whose father needed continuous care for days, noted Mary Ellen, who remembered those times as "dark days for all of us."²⁷

In addition to coping with psychological traumas, young emigrants found it difficult to listen to the moans of the sick, especially at night, when sleep was

cherished after a day's travel. "When cholera broke out," noted seventeen-year-old George Hunter, "the majority of those attacked were soon buried."²⁸ The most difficult night of his journey occurred when the captain of his company, whom George greatly respected, came down with cholera. George laid beside the dying man during his last hours. He wrote the words, "I shall never forget that cold foggy night when the stillness was only broken by the groans of the sick and dying."²⁹ A similar night was described by Elizabeth Keegan who was twelve when she made the tedious journey to California in 1852, with only her mother, a servant girl, and a hired hand. The four emigrants escaped sickness, but in a letter that Elizabeth wrote home to her sister and brother in St. Louis, she spoke about the fresh graves, at least two per day, that her unusually small party encountered on the trail. She was particularly touched when the foursome camped next to a company where several travelers were sick and the men were in the process of digging a grave for a fellow emigrant. Wrote Elizabeth, "cries of agony drove sleep from many a pillow, all from Asiatic Cholera."³⁰

Sick emigrants often pleaded with others, especially family members, to relieve their suffering. Because it required strength and skill to drive a team of oxen, care for the sick was oftentimes delegated to younger members of the party, especially girls, many of whom spent hours tending to those who were ill. Such a case was related by 1846 overlander Edwin Bryant who, although not a physician, administered to several sick travelers during his journey to California. Beyond Fort Laramie, overlanders frequently encountered Rocky Mountain spotted fever, or Colorado tick fever, commonly referred to as "mountain or camp fever," a disease less virulent than cholera, but sometimes fatal.

While traveling through the arid valley along the Sweetwater River, an emigrant

from a train that preceded Bryant's heard that Bryant might be able to help his wife who had been stricken with fever and was failing by the day. After analyzing her condition, Bryant believed that the woman was beyond human help and he wrote, "I felt a painful horror when looking upon her, distorted as her features were with agonizing suffering. Her daughters, three interesting girls from twelve to seventeen years, gathered around me with anxious and inquiring looks, watching every expression of my countenance while I was making the examination."³¹ Large doses of medicine had failed to alleviate her suffering and he soon became convinced that the woman would not live another twenty-four hours. He advised the daughters to give their mother large doses of tea every hour, which they faithfully did, along with providing her with round-the-clock care. Their efforts were successful and Bryant later learned that the woman, whom he had felt was doomed, had recovered to live a long and healthy life.³²

To escape a harsh stepmother, teenager Margaret Windsor Iman traveled west with an emigrant train that left Missouri for Oregon in 1852. When the mother of a small infant became sick and died, Margaret assumed responsibility for the child. She carried the baby during the day, and when her company stopped for the day, she went from camp to camp in search of a nursing mother for the motherless child. "No one ever refused when I presented it to them," remembered Margaret.³³

Seventeen-year-old Annie Medley rarely left the family wagon because her brother, John, whom ten-year-old Mary Medley described as an "invalid," required constant care and observation. Mary admired Annie's resourcefulness, her caregiving skills, and her ability to intuitively know the needs of others. Near Salt Lake City, the blinding sun became unbearable for one of the young boys who had sensitive eyes and

was traveling with the Medleys. So, while caring for her brother, Annie sewed the boy a sunbonnet with splints in it, which he unashamedly wore for the rest of the journey. Mary went on to note that, “toward the end of the trip we were so worn out that we were not particular how we were dressed.”³⁴ Like Annie Medley, it was the selflessness exhibited by twelve-year-old John Braly that made the contribution of young emigrants invaluable. He became sick himself while simultaneously helping his mother care for his ill father and siblings on their 1847 journey between Fort Boise and the Whitman Mission. “I grew weaker and yet weaker,” recounted John, who, because he feared that the wagon would run over him if he should fall, drifted further from the group. His next memory was one of being carried to his mother’s wagon by another emigrant.³⁵

Susan Noble Grant was fifteen-years-old when she made her 1847 journey to Salt Lake City, and it would become an experience which left her wracked with guilt for the rest of her life. While traveling toward the Sweetwater River in Wyoming, several emigrants in her train came down with the dreaded mountain fever. Along the way, Susan often helped care for the two young children of Jedediah Grant, two-year-old Caddie and six-month-old Margaret, who had become sick one morning shortly after her mother, Caroline Grant, was stricken and confined to bed. By sundown, Margaret too was seized with violent spasms, remembered Susan, who continued to care for the older girl. Later that evening, a fierce thunderstorm struck the camp creating a chaos in which tents were toppled and wagon contents were drenched. Susan fought to stay awake most of the night since it was her duty to care for Margaret, but she fell asleep from exhaustion. The girls later awoke to a glaring sun and low voices which, for Susan, brought to mind the condition of Margaret, who was

no longer in the wagon. Although Susan knew that she did not have the power to control the fate of the baby, she was devastated to hear that Margaret had died. “No one else had been to bed in our wagon . . . I was ashamed I had gone to sleep . . . one quick glance and I read part of the sorrow the night had left behind,” she recounted.³⁶

Despite herculean caregiving efforts, trail diseases were not sufficiently understood and most overlanders lacked awareness about how sanitation and diet contributed to illness. Early guidebooks made little if any mention of the prevalence and prevention of sickness. Lucy Rutledge Cooke recorded the only reference to children being vaccinated as a disease preventive in 1852. While on a steamer to St. Joseph, Lucy and William Cooke’s one-year-old daughter, Sarah, and William Cooke’s five-year-old nephew, Richard, received vaccinations. The procedure that was performed on Sarah was successful after the first attempt, and she apparently had little reaction, but Richard endured the process three times which made his arm painfully sore. Lucy wrote that her mother-in-law, who was “not afraid to use cold water at such a time for RW’s arm was in such an inflammation that she had to keep putting wet cloths to it all one night.”³⁷ A vaccination for smallpox was developed earlier in the nineteenth century, and it is perplexing why more children were not vaccinated. The reason asserted by medical historian Charles Rosenberg was that the majority of the population did not fully understand the impact of contagious disease, and relied instead on older methods of treatments. Also, medical experts failed to apply similar theories of vaccination to other contagious diseases.³⁸

Traveling along the lesser-utilized north side of the Platte River, Mormon travelers seemed to be less vulnerable to disease. They found relief from hunger in artichokes and wild onions along the bottomlands of the Missouri River, which some

attributed to be natural preventatives against illness, particularly scurvy. Inhalation and consumption of sagebrush, which they believed to be a cause of disease, was also discouraged.³⁹ Even such limited awareness of disease prevention inevitably saved the lives of many Mormons. When word spread that disease seemed to occur less frequently on the north side of the Platte River, panicked companies rushed to make the crossing, remembered Martha Hill, who watched with horror as unprepared and ill-equipped emigrants and stock became tangled in the treacherous quicksands of the river in an effort to escape the contagious cholera. Many emigrants traveling with the Hills feared that the new arrivals would only add to the spread of disease, and those who were not burdened with cattle fled for their lives. At this point in her journey, Martha acquired a unique admiration for her father, who, unlike others, did not flee, and he unselfishly offered his medicine to cholera sufferers.⁴⁰

Because their knowledge of and access to medicines was limited, emigrants often relied on primitive home remedies such as cold and hot wraps, herbal teas, doses of gunpowder dissolved in water, and sucking on hot rags soaked with vinegar. The mothers of Marilla Washburn and Jane Bybee, both traveling to Oregon during peak cholera years, resorted to such primitive measures when their children became sick because medicine was not available. When two of her twelve children became sick, Mary Jane Washburn had them drink hot whiskey and then put flannel clothing that was soaked in alcohol on their stomachs. Such extreme heat was difficult to tolerate, remembered twelve-year-old Marilla Washburn, but the remedy was effective at least for these two disease-ridden siblings.⁴¹ Similarly, the parents of four-year-old Jane Bybee depended on liquor to alleviate the suffering of their daughter when she suddenly became stricken with what the Bybees feared was cholera. It was a risk for

them to resort to such a method, however, because the Bybees were Mormons, and the use of alcohol was forbidden. But when Jane's condition deteriorated at an unusually rapid pace, her father knew that his daughter's life was in jeopardy, and that something must be done immediately. He therefore made the courageous decision to remove his family from the company and stop to allow time for Jane to rest. While camped, her mother bathed her with alcohol and then gave her some to drink which provided her with some relief. By late that afternoon, the Bybees felt Jane was able to tolerate travel and the family successfully caught up with their company, concealing the method they used to relieve the suffering of their daughter.⁴²

Many emigrants, like Polly Coon, failed to understand why families would attempt such a dangerous cross-country journey without packing effective medicines. Polly was responsible for most of the care of her brothers and sisters who were under the age of twelve during the Coon's 1852 journey to Oregon. Her mother, whom she described as a "semi-invalid," was not capable of performing the task. After her train had passed several fresh graves, Polly commented on the fatal effect of cholera. Making the assumption that so many of the deaths were due to the lack of proper medication, Polly wrote that "very many of the victims to this disease have no medicine and no preparation for sickness which seems to be the height of presumption."⁴³

Those emigrants who packed medicine kits found them invaluable and were often envied by others who were not as well-equipped. Oregon-bound Mary Louisa Black, mother of three small children, packed a collection of drugs recommended by her family doctor, along with instructions for their use. Her list, which was typical, included castor oil, peppermint essence, epsom salts, quinine, citric acid, laudanum,

calomel, and rum or whiskey. Mary's diary makes frequent references to illnesses experienced by herself and others and to the dispensing of her variety of drugs which she generously shared with other members of her train.⁴⁴ Medicines of all kinds were valued on the trails. The most routinely used drug for children was calomel, a chalky and distasteful mixture, which, earlier in the century, had been described as "fit for a horse."⁴⁵ Children reviled the taste, but the medicine, though not a cure, proved to relieve some of the unbearable cholera symptoms, especially dehydration. In his record of emigrants passing through his 1849 relief camp in California, J. Goldsborough Bruff noted that calomel was somewhat effective when given to a five-year-old child, whom Bruff described as pale, thin and weak. At least it calmed his immediate suffering which was a comfort to the mother.⁴⁶

Many women hung medicine kits in bags from nails on the sides of wagons or in pockets which were sewn into the inside of the wagon covers. Children often knew where medicine was kept, which created a potential danger and ultimately proved fatal for six-year-old Salita Jane Henderson. When eleven-year-old Lucy Ann Henderson and her family bade farewell to the California emigrants with whom they had traveled since their 1846 departure from St. Joseph and made plans to continue on to Oregon, their company laid over at Boiling Springs in Nevada. Because the Hendersons traveled with the first company which opted to take the drier Applegate Cut-off to Oregon, emigrants such as Lucy's mother were busy preparing food and filling kegs with water while the children played, oftentimes in the wagons that had been emptied for cleaning and reloading. "I shall never forget that camp," remembered Lucy Henderson.⁴⁷

The medicine kit, which included a bottle of the potent painkiller laudanum,

was not removed from the wagon. After discovering the bag hanging from a sideboard of the wagon, Lucy and a friend became curious and decided to taste the medicine. It had a bitter taste so the girls drank no more and replaced the bottle in the medicine bag. Salita Jane or "Lettie," had been dejectedly denied a taste. So, after waiting for the older girls to leave the wagon, she helped herself and consumed the entire bottle of the toxic medicine. The drowsy child managed to reach the campfire where the women were preparing supper, but was told by her unaware mother to run away and not bother the women while they were cooking. Lettie staggered around until she found some nearby blankets and fell asleep. When she was called to dinner, the child did not respond, and "it was too late to save her life," recounted Lucy. Sadly, Robert Henderson took the walnut boards that the family had used for a table while crossing the plains and made a coffin for his daughter. She was buried seven days before her seventh birthday.⁴⁸

During the 1850s, few companies reached their destinations without sickness. With more families moving across the overland trails, some emigrants began to suspect a correlation between cleanliness and disease. Dr. Edward Tompkins noted that "sickness began to prevail on every hand and the river was almost completely lined by tents containing the sick and dying. . . . The scene was truly terrific . . . all of which we think might have been avoided with cleanliness and care."⁴⁹ That same year, another physician attended to a man who had died and left a wife and seven children. The desolate condition of his remaining family members sickened the doctor who attributed the cause of the man's death to the condition of the Platte River. In a letter that he sent to the St. Louis Republican, the doctor revealed his disgust by the human waste that had accumulated in wells that were sunk by earlier emigrants when he

wrote that, “the scum 30,000 persons left along the road, the use of filthy water, exposure and unwholesome diet, are sufficient, in my opinion, to account for all the sickness which has occurred.”⁵⁰

Eight-year-old Elizabeth Lord remembered that most of the members of her company were careful to boil water before drinking it and that they criticized others who had used water from previously sunken wells. In 1850, “fresh graves began to be frequent,” according to Elizabeth, “and many people became panic stricken.”⁵¹ Traveling with two small children during the peak cholera year of 1852, Mary Variel routinely boiled water every night and filled canteens for the following day’s journey. But the process required time and work, and disagreements quickly arose about the necessity of taking such a precaution. Mary noted that families who neglected to boil their water became sick, and some were torn apart trying to combat illness.⁵²

Emigrants repeatedly complained about the wretched condition of the Platte River water. Charles Frederick True described its water as “unfit for drinking and almost as useless for animals.” The eighteen-year-old emigrant decided that he would rather be thirsty than drink water from the Platte River.⁵³ Three years later, Nellie Slater was elated when her train made their last camp along the shallow river. “We do not feel very sorry about it,” she wrote, “for we have had to use the river water a good deal of the time and it is miserable stuff.”⁵⁴ By the time True and Slater journeyed west, some guidebooks began to urge emigrants to choose their camps carefully. Randolph B. Marcy devoted a section of his 1859 Prairie Traveler to “sanitary considerations,” but attributed the cause of disease to the condition of the atmosphere near rivers and swamps rather than to the consumption of contaminated water.⁵⁵

However it was spread, overlanders were aware of the fact that cholera was

contagious, and therefore, when emigrants died of the disease, a decision had to be made about what to do with their possibly infected possessions. Many companies chose to burn the belongings of cholera victims, sometimes including their wagons, and they forbade other travelers to acquire their cholera-infested items. When the train of Martha Hill came upon a man who had just buried his young bride on the way to Oregon, the widower, who was within calling distance of the Hill's camp, told Martha's father, Isaac, that he was leaving behind his well-provisioned wagon. The wagon included a trunk which was filled with his wife's beautiful clothes and he was welcome to distribute the clothing among his daughters. "Such a longing went up from our hearts for the beautiful things," recounted Martha, "but my father soon squelched them when he asked us which we wanted, fine clothes or cholera."⁵⁶

After a man traveling with Sarah Royce died from cholera while the train was camped near the Elkhorn River, Sarah, who feared that her two-year-old daughter was at risk, elected to empty out her wagon and clean everything in it. But it was early in their journey, and the Royces were not yet exhausted, nor were they worried yet about taking the time to disinfect their possessions. They were also traveling with an unusually small group which enabled them to make such choices without protest from other emigrants since most travelers preferred to press on, believing it was more important to keep moving than to clean their wagons. Ironically, the Royces did not move quickly enough and were dangerously late crossing the Sierra Nevadas into California but fortunately survived because of a government rescue unit.⁵⁷

Despite the fact that some Americans had begun to believe that disease could be controlled by environmental improvements, many others, in 1849, when the cholera epidemic infiltrated the country for the second time, could not escape the pervasive

notion that a man became sick due to his economic status or immoral lifestyle.

“Men’s faults were still a possible cause of cholera. Poverty was still, in the eyes of most Americans, a result, not a cause of vice and imprudence. Cholera was still a judgement,” wrote Charles Rosenberg, who went on to note that, “moralism, if not theology or piety, still pervaded medical thought, as it did the American mind in general. Sin, in the scientific guise of predisposition, could still induce a case of cholera.”⁵⁸ Disease, then, was viewed by many as not simply a biological phenomenon, but also as punishment for a growing atheism in America and a national preoccupation with materialism. Some influential physicians also asserted that the poor, many of whom traveled west, were more susceptible to cholera because of their ignorance, unclean practices, and violent emotions.⁵⁹ These prevalent perceptions affected emigrants on the trails, and, at times, required them to make difficult choices, which involved both group and individual responsibilities and loyalties. In some trains, especially those with less organization, it all-too-often became every man for himself as emigrants questioned to what extent they had obligations to other travelers.

If disease struck a train, emigrants often feared contact with victims and, for many overlanders, loyalties they might previously have had toward fellow travelers were weakened or, in extreme cases, discarded. Because of this, some sick overlanders were abandoned, or became victims of cruel treatment, or both. When eighteen-year-old John Steele traveled west in 1850, he was shaken by what he referred to as “man’s inhumanity to man.” His company had descended a valley near the Humboldt River on the California trail where a preceding train had completed a funeral for a man, James Malcom, who clearly had been left by his train. Sick and fatigued, Malcom, who had paid for his passage in advance, was no longer profitable to his

company and he was denied a request to ride in a wagon. He soon fell far behind his company, and he subsequently related to emigrants from a Missouri company who had found him that he had not believed he had been deserted until he saw the three wagons that he had been traveling with disappear toward the Humboldt River. Malcom drifted into unconsciousness and efforts to revive him were unsuccessful.⁶⁰

Bernard J. Reid, overland traveler of 1849, related a most distressing story which also involved the abandonment of two emigrants, in this case, both young. Beyond South Pass, Reid's company elected to bypass Fort Bridger in Wyoming and make the desert crossing where they had to ford the Little and Big Sandy Rivers before reaching the Green River in Wyoming. At the Little Sandy, Reid, who traveled ahead scouting for his company, passed the graves of the Reverend Robert Gilmore and his wife, Mary. Inside what overlanders referred to as a "split stick," a board which was covered with notices from previous emigrants, there was a note which indicated that the Gilmores had died from cholera. Near the burial site on the banks of the Little Sandy River was an abandoned wagon which Reid spotted while on the bluffs overlooking the valley and he immediately rode to the site. Wrote Reid, "On approaching nearer I was surprised to see a neatly dressed girl of about 17, sitting on the wagon tongue, her feet resting on the grass, and her eyes apparently directed at vacancy. She seemed like one dazed or in a dream and did not seem to notice me until I spoke to her."⁶¹

Reid learned that the girl, Nellie, was the daughter of the Gilmores who had died two days earlier, and that she had a younger brother who was painfully sick inside of the wagon. The siblings were alone, their oxen either lost or stolen. Two doctors from Reid's train treated them, and when the other emigrants observed their

condition, a “handsome purse” was collected and the two orphans were placed with a company from Missouri which was traveling behind Reid’s company. The train that the Gilmores had been traveling with waited for three days, but feared that if they did not push on they risked being trapped in the Sierra Nevadas where members of the Donner Party had perished three years earlier. “It was so pitiful a story,” wrote Reid who in 1903 placed advertisements in Missouri and Sacramento newspapers inquiring about the fate of the Gilmores. He learned that Nellie Gilmore married the uncle of the man that responded to his inquiries and that the couple had returned East. Her brother, Charles Gilmore, also survived, returned east, and died in Michigan in 1878.⁶²

The intense pressure that overlanders felt to stay on schedule meant that companies often decided at what point they thought it would be better for the group to push on, sometimes leaving families with sick members to fend for themselves. On their way to California while traveling along the Platte River in June of 1852, the mother of young emigrants, Annie, Mary, John and Jim Medley, became seriously ill. The Missouri company with which the family was traveling made the decision to leave the Medleys behind, a situation which terrified adults and children, and one that was not uncommon during the peak cholera years. The family made camp on the river, hoping that a doctor that they had heard was traveling behind them would be sympathetic to their mother’s condition and provide assistance. The physician agreed to examine Mrs. Medley and promptly concluded that she was indeed stricken with cholera and he thus informed the despondent family that there was nothing he could do for her. By two o’clock that afternoon she was dead, remembered ten-year-old Mary, who described her death as “sad and sacred.” The sympathetic doctor did, however, offer the family the option to travel on to California with his company, a

gesture which they gratefully accepted.⁶³

If pushing ahead at all costs was a mistake, it was one that Missourian Solomon Zumwalt did not make when he traveled with his wife, Nancy, and their eleven children to Oregon in 1850. After his family had departed Fort Kearny, Zumwalt soon discovered that cholera was more prevalent along the Platte River than he had expected. When five members of his family became sick, including himself, Zumwalt faced the stark realization that other travelers were not willing to allow time for the sick members of his family to recover nor to take the time to locate a doctor from another train. "The trouble was," he wrote, "that people would not stop to doctor their sick."⁶⁴ Solomon Zumwalt subsequently chose to leave his train and was thus compelled to winter at Salt Lake City with his large family and continue his journey in 1851. It was an alternative that most emigrants would not consider, but one that he believed had saved the lives of his sick children. Zumwalt never regretted his decision and was proud of the fact that he did not lose one member of his family to sickness.⁶⁵

Although infrequent, another potential tragedy that resulted from the powerful desire of emigrants to flee lethal cholera localities was the prospect of burying sick persons before they had actually died. Eleven-year-old Elisha Brooks remembered that it was not uncommon for emigrants to leave those who were sick with "watchers" whose responsibility it was to bury the unfortunate victims if they were to die, and then catch up with the others. "Rumors were prevalent," noted Elisha, "that if the sick lingered too long, they were at the mercy of the watchers who sometimes became impatient with their duty and buried the unfortunates before they had died."⁶⁶ Mary Ellen Todd remembered how her father openly expressed his concern that sick emigrants might be interred before their death not only because too many travelers

were anxious to escape infected areas, but also because when people became violently ill, they sometimes lapsed into an unconscious state that closely resembled death.⁶⁷

When his six-year-old daughter, Louvina, became sick, Abbott Todd placed her in a tent, along with another sick daughter, Cynthia, hoping that they would get better. When Louvina showed no signs of life, Todd held a glass over her mouth to see if there was any moisture and if she was in fact breathing before he was willing to pronounce her dead. Louvina proved to be alive, and most likely survived the journey not only because of the round-the-clock care provided by her family, but also the willingness of her company to allow the time that she needed to improve.⁶⁸ Similarly, sixteen-year-old Fanny Fry also seemed dead when she became sick after falling under a handcart during her 1859 journey to Salt Lake City. When members of her company were unable to find a pulse, she was considered by all present to be dead and was placed in a tent where her young friends sewed a blanket to her clothing in preparation for burial. But Fanny was not dead and when she regained consciousness, she was surprised to find her body clothed for burial and a grave already dug. She never fully recovered for the rest of her journey, but was fortunate not to be left buried on the plains.⁶⁹

Because sickness so devastated overlanders, individual and mass graves were present along the trails and they were eerie and constant reminders that disease could strike at any moment. For children who were old enough to walk, and too young to drive the teams or help care for stock, grave-counting became a haunting pastime along the trail. Mary Ann Taylor, seven-years-old at the time of her journey, remembered 1852 as a year when it was possible for emigrants to almost follow the trails by watching for graves.⁷⁰ On one day alone, in that same year, eleven-year-old

Clarence Bagley and a friend viewed separate sides of the road to count graves. They made a tally of nearly 120 graves, and “doubtless there were many we did not see,” remembered Clarence.⁷¹

It was not uncommon for families to suffer the deaths of more than one family member, particularly during the peak cholera years between 1849 and 1855. When Samuel and Nancy Taylor emigrated to Portland, the family buried a son, Preston, at Fort Laramie. Shortly thereafter, Nancy and the remaining ten children buried their father and husband. When the family reached the Snake River, Sarah and Mary Preston died within twelve hours of each other, and, “it seemed there was hardly a day when there were not one or more funerals in the wagon train,” remembered Daniel Taylor, aged seven in 1852.⁷² Seventeen-year-old Abigail Jane Scott, designated chronicler for her family, noted that because of warm weather and bad water, not one member of her train felt completely well. Graves along the trail became so numerous that she no longer made note of them. By the end of July, Abigail also became sick and her father, John Tucker, filled in the family diary for her during those days. When she was well enough to resume her writing, it was her sad task to record the sickness and death of her three-year-old brother, Willie, from cholera. The child became so debilitated that the Scotts considered his death a welcome relief. “In his last few hours, Willie talked of his illness, he talked of dying and he wanted to die,” wrote Abigail. West of Fort Laramie, the Tucker family buried the boy just two months and seven days after they had buried their mother, Ann Roelfson Scott, who, like her son, was unable to withstand disease.⁷³

Diarists Mary Ann Weston Maughan and Sophia Lois Goodridge spoke of tragedies suffered by families in their trains who also lost more than one member in a

short period of time. On July 1, 1850, after they had buried one-year-old Joseph Green, the third member of the same family to die within one week, Sophia Goodridge wrote that her camp was “afflicted and distressed.” Joseph’s mother, Mary Ann Green, and his sister, eighteen-year-old Jane Green, had preceded him in death. Thomas Green used the top boards of his wagon to bury his family and then pushed on with the others for Salt Lake City.⁷⁴ That same year, Mary Ann Maughan recorded June 22nd as being “the worst since crossing the Missouri,” when emigrants in her train buried three children from the same family. Within a week, the mother of the three children fell victim to disease, along with another emigrant mother who left nine children. It was a tremendous setback for fellow travelers who gathered and prayed that members of their own families, especially those so young, would be spared.⁷⁵

In 1863, the three families of Henry and Elizabeth Elliott, Charles and Margaret Logsdon, and George and Margaret Howell departed Marshall County, Iowa for Oregon. The overlanders were motivated by letters that the Elliotts had received from Henry’s brother, William, who described the rich farmland of the Willamette Valley. Not one of the families, however, would arrive in Oregon without suffering the deaths of at least one of their children. On June 12, Elizabeth Elliott responded to a letter that she had received at Fort Laramie from her parents in Marshall County, Iowa. By that time, both the Howells and Logsdons had suffered the loss of a child due to illness when one of the Elliott’s three-year-old twins, Fremont, became afflicted. He suffered terribly from a bloated stomach and clenched fists and did not respond to any medication. Approximately three weeks later, Elizabeth wrote another letter to her parents in which she informed them that “Fremont is no longer a sufferer on this earth, he died Sabbath afternoon. He could not lay down and sleep for over two

weeks, he set up day and night.”⁷⁶

When parents lost children it was devastating, and, so too, when children buried parents. The children of S.P. Burr watched with fear as their father became violently ill during a morning of their 1854 journey. He was dead by 3:00 P.M., wrote a fellow traveler, who went on to note that the children and their mother suffered extreme anguish throughout the day and that nothing could be done to console them.⁷⁷ Six-year-old Peter McBride was one of many children who traveled with the Mormon handcart companies and who lost a parent on the journey to Salt Lake City. As was the case with the Burrs, others made attempts to comfort him while emigrants buried his father. Before the burial was complete, Peter approached the gravediggers and requested permission to remove some fishhooks from his father’s pocket.⁷⁸

If children were so unfortunate to lose both parents on the way west, others contributed to their care, and, if possible, made every effort to keep children of the same family together. Sarah Cummins was a member of a company which became embroiled in a heated dispute at Bear River concerning the best and shortest route for the company to take into the Grande Ronde Valley of Oregon. Military escorts left the emigrants assured that a party from the Whitman Mission would meet the company and guide them through the dangerous territory. But, after a good deal of grappling, a small group of men took their families and left the main party and, as a result, suffered tremendous hardship and death. A survivor made his way to the Dalles where he related to his former travelers that others were still alive and in desperate need of rescue. The reunion of the families was a time of sadness in which all made an effort to assist their former travelling companions. The stranded group included a large number of children from the Parker family whose mother was killed while descending

a steep mountain. "The children were kept together," according to Sarah, "and no family was separated . . . it was the delight of each to do all possible for these dear motherless children."⁷⁹

The most notorious case in which an entire family of children were orphaned on the way west occurred in 1844, when Henry and Naomi Sager both succumbed to sickness before completing their journey to Oregon. There were six children in the Sager family and Naomi would bear yet another on the trail before her death. It was an early migration year which meant that more than the usual uncertainties existed, and trail routes were yet unproven. Naomi Sager was hesitant about the prospect of attempting such a long arduous journey with small children. But Henry Sager, who had moved his family from Ohio to Missouri in 1838, was restless once more, remembered his daughter, Catherine Sager Pringle. For the younger children who rode in wagons and merely suffered from motion sickness, travel was tolerable along the relatively flat terrain near the Platte River. But tragedy soon struck the Sager family when Naomi was severely injured after the wagon in which she was riding overturned. Henry Sager badly scraped his face in an effort to rescue his pregnant wife. Yet the need to keep moving meant more suffering, not only for Naomi, but also for her children who became distraught hearing their mother cry out in pain.⁸⁰

To add to these setbacks, shortly before their arrival at Fort Laramie, Catherine's dress became tangled in a wheel axle, which caused her to fall under a moving wagon. Her leg was crushed and she had no choice but to ride with her mother for the remainder of the journey. The accident left the nine-year-old crippled for life. Knowing that they still had to cross the Blue Mountains before descending into the Willamette Valley, and that Fort Laramie was the last American outpost in 1844, the

company, under the direction of William Shaw, again pushed on, allowing no time for recovery. Naomi and Catherine Sager remained sick when Henry Sager came down with a severe case of camp fever shortly before the train reached the Green River in Wyoming. Worried about the fate of his family, and after securing a pledge from Shaw to care for his family, Henry Sager died. Immediately after they had buried him, the men of the company resumed making plans for the difficult route down the Snake River. In tears, the bereaved Sager children and the despondent Naomi Sager left their father and husband buried on the banks of the Green River.⁸¹

With her husband deceased, Naomi made plans to winter at the Whitman Mission where she hoped that the missionaries would provide her children with some much-needed relief. But it would be a destination that she would not realize. Growing increasingly weak, and drifting in and out of delirium, she now understood why her suffering husband had begged to be removed from the wagon. She grew to believe that it would be easier to die than to endure more jolting. In a conscious moment, and realizing her fatal situation, the young mother of now seven children pleaded with her son, John, and William Shaw and his wife, Sally, to keep her family together. Naomi, then barely able to speak, addressed her last words to her dead husband, which were “Oh, Henry! If you only knew how we have suffered.”⁸²

The funerals of Naomi and Henry Sager were simple, and their children had to make due with what was available to bury their parents. After his death, Henry’s body was placed in a split hollowed-out log and buried on the banks of the Green River. But, for their mother, the Sager girls were more concerned about her burial garment and had hoped to bury her in a light-colored dress, but there was not one to be found. So the children clothed Naomi in a calico dress, wrapped her body in a bed sheet, and

left her buried in a shallow grave near the trail. When the Sager children left their parents in graves on the trail, they had no choice but to come to terms with the ultimate sorrow of westward travel, and one that hundreds of families would have to face for the remaining years of the overland migration.⁸³

The Shaws, true to their word, delivered the orphans to the Whitman Mission. Elizabeth Sager remembered how Sally Shaw bathed them and dressed them in the nicest clothes they had so that they would look presentable to Marcus and Narcissa Whitman. The Whitmans had heard about the Sagers before they arrived at the mission and were yet undecided if they would be able to provide a home for them. But, upon seeing the children they agreed to let them stay and soon the Sager children became part of the community at the mission. Despite the generosity that the Whitmans exhibited by accepting the children and making an effort to keep them together, their lives were not what they had hoped for with their parents in Oregon. They were expected to conform to the demands placed on all the children living with the Whitmans, which included long days of hard work and strict schooling. Three years after their arrival at the mission, however, tragedy again struck the Sager children when the older boys, John and Francis, who had pleaded with Shaw to allow them to continue with the train into the Willamette Valley, were killed during an attack on the mission by the Cayuse Indians.⁸⁴

Whether children lost parents or parents lost children, the experience was traumatic, and burial of the dead became an all-too-common ritual on the trails. Hundreds of diarists described the importance of being able to provide decent burials for relatives. The agonizing thought of leaving a family member in a grave on the plains, where their remains would be vulnerable to wolves or Indians, motivated many

emigrants to be prepared for such an event. Mrs. U.J. McConnell, who crossed the plains as a seven-year-old girl in 1852, was one of many emigrants who remembered how her father had prepared for the possible death of a family member. He created a false bottom on the wagon with clean boards that could be used in case a coffin was needed, but more than one coffin would be needed for this unfortunate family. Mrs. McConnell recounted that during the course of her family's journey, her mother, grandmother and grandfather had died from disease on the plains, and that two aunts had generously cared for her the rest of way to Oregon.⁸⁵

Mary Kimsey Simpson, mother of eleven children who traveled with her family from Missouri to Oregon in 1846, had heard about how dangerous the trip was and the primitive way in which emigrants were buried on the trails. Before her departure she therefore made a shroud for each member of her family in case of death, a task that many emigrant women undertook before their departures. It was unsettling for ten-year-old Barnet Simpson to watch his mother sew him a shroud, but the discomfort passed and Barnet soon became more interested in his hunting shirt that his mother had also made him. Fortunately, all members of the Simpson family arrived safely in Oregon and Mary made clothes for the children out of the unused shrouds.⁸⁶ So too did Sarah Sutton make a shroud for her sixteen-year-old daughter, Harriet Augusta, who was sick at the time the Suttons departed Illinois for Oregon in 1854. But it was mother, rather than daughter, who would need the burial garment after Sarah died from sickness just east of Mount Hood in Oregon. Along with emigrants from her train, nine of her children and four stepchildren buried Sarah. Wagons were then driven back and forth over her grave in the hope that it would not be disturbed, a common practice for overlanders who wanted to disguise a loved one's burial site.⁸⁷

After seven-year-old Enoch Garrison broke his leg, a government doctor refused to perform an amputation which the family thought was necessary. The boy subsequently developed an infection and the leg was amputated, but the procedure was too late. Enoch Garrison died and those emigrants who dug his grave were careful to cut and lift the grass in squares so they could be replaced after the grave had been filled. Then, like the Suttons, the wagons passed over the burial site. "Fathers wagons was driven to one side," remembered fifteen-year-old Henry Garrison, "and did not pass over the grave."⁸⁸

Because sickness and death affected everyone in a wagon train, burial rituals became the accepted duty of most companies. Common were stories like those of Ann Roberts and Ruth Shackelford. Ann Roberts traveled to Salt Lake City with her young son, Thomas, who had been sick since his birth. Her husband, Benjamin, remained in England while Ann, who was determined to raise her son as a Mormon in Salt Lake City, joined the 1862 company of Isaac Haight. She had carried her young son since the company crossed the Missouri River, but, near Chimney Rock, no longer able to withstand the travel, he died. Ann could not bear the thought of leaving her son on the plains wrapped only in a blanket and bed sheet which were all she could spare. The scene weighed heavily on Haight who took a bread box from the front of his wagon and offered it to the grieving mother for use as a coffin. Rather than covering the box with dirt, company members then gathered cobblestones from the surrounding hills to make Thomas' grave more secure. This gesture gave Ann Roberts comfort that the burial site would be less susceptible to destruction.⁸⁹

When Frank and Ruth Shackelford traveled to California in 1865 with their three small children, they were, like Ann Roberts, faced with the unbearable question

of how to bury their seven-year-old daughter, Mary, who died shortly after the family left Fort Bridger. Her father had paid a physician in the train five dollars, a huge sum at the time, for a small amount of morphine to relieve Mary's pain, but the medicine did not prevent her death. "Frank made her a right nice coffin, lined inside; the top was covered; couldn't get anything to cover the sides," wrote Ruth. To alleviate Ruth's suffering, and because she could not bear to see her daughter after her death, female companions traveling with the Shackelfords dressed Mary for Ruth, a deed which many compassionate women did when children in their trains died. Ruth Shackelford expressed her appreciation to the women in her diary when she described Mary's body as "dressed in solid green merino, a white collar and gloves, black belt and net."⁹⁰

In a few cases, Native Americans also grieved with and helped emigrants and settlers bury their dead. Shortly after the family of John Rogers James arrived in Washington, five-year-old Allen James became sick and died while his father was traveling to Olympia to purchase supplies for a house. When Samuel James returned and learned that his son had died, he was devastated. The death was especially difficult since the family had survived the challenging journey west, growing closer to one another each day. Recounted John James, "two Indian brothers, Tessian and Collalowan dug the grave and brought two cedar boards from the roof of their house to make the coffin. It was the custom of the Indians to take cry boards from the roof of their house for this purpose." The James family, along with the Indians who had assisted them, walked to the gravesite in a procession alongside the coffin, listened to a eulogy delivered by Samuel and then buried Allen James.⁹¹

Young emigrants rarely, however, observed Indian burial rites, although a

large number of them commented on the ways that various Native American tribes buried their dead. It is not surprising that they encountered so many dead Native Americans since no group was more negatively impacted by the contagious diseases that emigrants brought with them than the Indians. The overall death rate for Indians will never be precisely known, but its effect, particularly on the western plains tribes, was devastating. In 1849 alone, cholera claimed the lives of at least half of the Southern Cheyennes. The plains tribes contracted the disease when infected trains passed through their lands, traded goods, and left their dead buried on Indian land.⁹²

Overlanders knew that Indian losses from disease were substantial and that they grew to fear cholera more than any other hazard brought by white emigrants. Some companies, therefore, used their sick members to keep Indians along the trail at bay, a practice which often had a negative impact on young emigrants. When Captain James Clayton saw a large number of Indians approaching his train along the Platte, he lured them to his campsite, leading them to believe that they would receive the oxen and food that they had requested. Instead, when the Indians reached the wagons, Clayton escorted them to a wagon where there was a man with smallpox who had scales peeling from his face. The horrifying sight had its intended affect and the Indians rode away with great speed and no booty, remembered nineteen-year-old George Humphreys.⁹³

When six-year-old William Colvig traveled to Oregon, a band of Indians had gathered near his train, preparing for what emigrants thought was a possible attack. A man from the company who had been a trapper before joining a company bound for Oregon told some of the women in the train to cry out in sorrowful wails. When an Indian approached the company, the man told him that the women were crying for

family members who had died from cholera. The Indian returned to his companions who then speedily rode away. Recounted William, “they were deathly afraid of cholera – they passed the word to the other tribes who gave us a wide berth.”⁹⁴

Similarly, Martha Hill remembered how afraid everyone was of possible Indian attacks and that it was cholera that kept them relatively safe. “The train must stay together,” remembered Martha, “but the cholera proved a protection to us as we saw no more Indians while we stayed on the Platte River.”⁹⁵

In the end, all trail hardships paled in comparison with that of disease, and all diseases paled in comparison with cholera. It was deadly, highly contagious, violently painful, evoked terror among emigrants, caused them to make poor choices, divided families, affected Indian-emigrant relations, and brought out the best and worst of human nature. Between 1849 and 1855, the years in which cholera claimed the most emigrant lives, it was exceptional if a company reached its destination without losing some of its members to sickness. Scarcely a journal or reminiscence exists that does not speak of sickness, death and burial. When young emigrants began their journeys, they often reflected the joyous moods of their parents who looked forward to a new and more prosperous life. But, for many, their spirits were diminished after months of painstaking travel along routes lined with graves. Gloom pervaded among overlanders if cholera struck their trains, and for children, the burden was tremendous. As 1852 emigrant Mary Variel put it after members of her company had buried their first cholera victim, “it was a mournful affair, and we all felt very depressed, each one no doubt wondering who would be called next.”⁹⁶

Although the mortality rate on the trails was not substantially higher than it was in the eastern locations these people had left, migration, combined with disease,

made it exceptionally difficult for traveling families to endure.⁹⁷ After burying their dead, overlanders did not have the luxury of leaving loved ones in graves near their homes. Instead, grief-stricken emigrants were compelled to hurriedly bury their dead, conduct their eulogies, and push on. The scene that was described by John Enos, aged fourteen during his overland trip, was similar to hundreds of others who experienced disease and ultimately death while enroute to a better life. After the burial of a young girl in his company, John remembered empathizing with the girl's parents, and, in his words, "the wolves howling nearby, the desolation of the place and the anguish of the grief-stricken parents all combined to make it almost heartbreaking."⁹⁸

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CHAPTER FIVE

WORK, PLAY, PETS, PLEASURES AND PRAYER

Young Emigrants as Participants in the Overland Experience

At Fort Kearny, which seemed the remote outpost of civilization, my father exchanged a watch which was not needed for a very much needed and splendid black horse. He was a fine creature with Arab blood in his veins, and we called him Baal. Strong, swift and gentle, he became the pet of all the children, and it was on his back that I first learned the delight of riding a horse.¹

— Jean Frederick Loba: age eight at the time of his journey

The above-quoted memories of a boyhood on the overland trail were fondly recalled decades later by a man ensconced in his twilight years. The elation that Loba felt merely from riding a horse was one of the simple pleasures of his journey to Salt Lake City, and one that was shared by many young emigrants. “I rode through on horseback,” wrote twelve-year-old Elizabeth Keegan, describing her 1852 journey to California, “and I had a fine opportunity to see and examine everything of note on the way.”² There was nothing like freedom to escape the sameness and drudgery of travel, and children often felt most free when they rode horses, walked with friends, explored new country, or simply reclined for a few moments under a grove of trees. Like with their parents, their journals are filled with descriptions of the unique and overpowering scenery of the new lands through which they passed. Especially intrigued with Steamboat Springs in

Wyoming, twelve-year-old Sallie Hester noted, “they puff and blow and throw water in the air. The springs are in the midst of a grove of trees, a beautiful and romantic spot.”³ And, sensing relief after his train had conquered the dreaded Humboldt desert region in Nevada and had successfully crossed the Truckee River in California, teenager John Steele wrote, “what a luxury to recline beneath the shadow of a tree once more. We wanted to tell the oxen all about it . . . but they were busy laying in a supply of grass.”⁴

A successful overland journey hinged on the contributions of all family members, from the oldest grandparent to even the very young children. Because most emigrant families were farm families, the manner in which labor was divided on farms was generally translated to the trail, which meant a sexual division of labor in which children learned from and imitated the adult members of their families. Men and male children were consumed with the daily labor-intensive tasks involved with moving their families, which included caring for wagons, tools, and stock, organizing river, mountain, and desert crossings, and, if needed, protecting their families from possible dangers. Women and young girls shouldered the domestic responsibilities of cooking, washing, cleaning wagons, and caring for the younger children and the sick. Parents expected children to participate in the rigorous activities of the trip, and the chores that they were assigned generally depended on their age.

It did not take young emigrants long to adjust to the daily rhythms of the journey. Maria Elliot’s description of a typical day of work on the trail demonstrated a combined effort. Forty miles east of Fort Kearny, while encamped on the Platte River, Maria wrote,

“we have all been very busy doing various things, some sifting Indian meal, others doctoring the lame cattle and horses, herding cattle, getting wood and water, washing, mending, packing and unpacking trunks, and other things too numerous to mention.”⁵

Fourteen-year-old John Enos similarly noted that “the first week found all well disciplined, performing with exactness the several duties devolving upon each male.”⁶

But after overlanders departed Fort Laramie and reached the more demanding terrains of the mountains and deserts, roles sometimes blurred between males and females. Adult males frequently found themselves cooking, washing, and caring for their wives and children when they became ill. Conversely, women and girls performed heavy physical labor when needed, and, in some cases, proved to be more resilient than the men and boys with whom they traveled. For example, in 1846, fifteen members of the Donner-Reed party who were stranded in the Sierra Nevadas set out on snowshoes in an attempt to obtain help at an American outpost seventy miles from their camps at Alder Lake. Known as the “Forlorn Hope Party,” the group was comprised of five women, three of them teenagers, eight men, two young boys, and two Miwouk Indians who were to serve as guides. Eleven-year-old Bill Murphy returned to the lake-camps, unable to endure the journey, and twelve-year-old Lemuel Murphy, “delirious with hunger,” died after twelve days. After thirty-three days of agonizing mountain travel with little food, all five of the young women survived, compared with only two of the men. This demonstrated their stamina and revealed that women and girls were valuable assets to their companies.⁷

Yet, it was not the extreme privations, but rather the monotonous routines which consumed the lives of most overlanders. For the men and older boys, the first task after a 4:00 or 5:00 a.m. wake-up call was to catch, harness and saddle the horses and guide the livestock to their respective wagons where they would be yoked and hitched for a 7:00 or 8:00 a.m. start. Driving wagons was an uncomfortable and unpleasant chore that was generally left to the adults, primarily the men, most of whom drove their oxen by walking alongside the wagons. If they could afford a hired hand, family heads tended to employ teenaged boys who helped perform the task. If needed, women drove the teams and wagons and, in rare cases, children did so. Six weeks after departing Iowa for Salt Lake City, Hannah Tapfield King was told by her husband, Thomas, that she was to drive the family wagon. Handling a wagon was a responsibility which Hannah detested and one which meant that she had to endure constant criticism from her husband. Noted Hannah, "Mr. King was in a grumbling spirit which marred it as he often does—finding fault with everything." After an accident occurred in which she mishandled the wagon, Hannah described her husband's verbal insults as intolerable and informed him that she preferred to walk and would no longer drive the wagon. Thomas King then turned to the couple's eleven-year-old son, Thomas King, Jr., to take over the duty. But Tom fared no better than his mother, at one point running the wagon against another carriage while diligently trying to guide his team through a mud hole. Hannah expressed empathy for her son whom she thought was too young to be put in such a dangerous and volatile position, and she

remarked: “and poor Tom—a mere child—has been made to drive a waggon—when of course he knows nothing about ox-teaming.”⁸

When brothers John and Jim Braly traveled to Oregon in 1847, they were twelve and fourteen respectively, and Jim often drove the wagon. John admired his brother who worked hard, “tugging, pulling, twisting and lifting.” John also empathized with his older brother who became discouraged when their father criticized him for not controlling the teams.⁹ If women chose to undertake an overland journey without husbands, then often the burden of driving the family wagon fell to their older sons, as was the case with eleven-year-old Elisha Brooks and ten-year-old Jasper Lawn. When Eliza Brooks was without a teamster, the responsibility of driving the wagon fell to Elisha who remembered the duty as “an arrangement that I did not fully appreciate.”¹⁰ After Jasper Henry Lawn’s father died in Illinois, his mother decided to join family members in California. Reflecting on his boyhood journey, Jasper wrote: “I was 10 years old when we finished our long trip, and had driven my mother’s team from start to finish except one time when we had to travel nearly all night to reach water. I was too tired to walk . . . and Mother got out on that sandy desert and drove the teams while I slept in the wagon.”¹¹

More often than not, older children, both boys and girls, were responsible for the care of loose stock, which meant walking or riding horses behind the wagons, and prodding along slow-moving animals that might otherwise be inclined to wander. If a company was large, this was often an assignment that was delegated to the children. In addition to walking fifteen to twenty miles a day, this duty required stamina,

concentration, and, on windy days, meant contending with a great deal of dust. Some children, such as Virginia Reed, aged twelve in 1846, were hesitant about the prospect of traveling across the continent with ox-teams. Recounted Virginia, “we children were afraid of the oxen, thinking they could go wherever they pleased as they had no bridles.”¹²

Willie Belshaw, seven-years-old in 1853, rode a horse and was entrusted with the loose stock for most of his overland trip to Oregon.¹³ And, Ann Yantis, who crossed the plains in 1852, inherited the chore of herding loose cattle in her train from her older sister who was injured and subsequently became incapable of managing the stock. “So Ann, despite her age and inexperience, assumed the task, driving the cattle nearly all the way across,” recounted her daughter Sarah Catherine Koontz, who considered what her mother had endured to have been an incredible feat.¹⁴

In most of the recorded cases, children willingly accepted and followed through with this duty. Still, there were some who neglected to follow through with their assignments and had to be prodded continually by their parents. Traveling with her extended family, Helen Carpenter, a nineteen-year-old bride who eloquently recorded her journey to California, presented a less flattering account of the dependability of her cousin, Teresa, who was asked to help with the task of herding stock. Wrote Helen, “Cousin Teresa is going to ride her Indian pony and help the boys drive the cattle which bring up the rear of the procession. That is, she will help when she wishes to, and when she is tired of this, she will ride in the spring wagon with her mother.”¹⁵

After each day's travel, a camp was usually made by forming a corral in which loose stock could be enclosed. Depending on circumstances, tents were assembled near the circle where the cooking was done and where most emigrants slept. During the nights while company members slept, it was generally the responsibility of the men and older boys to guard the stock. Most guidebook authors warned overlanders that the consequences could be severe if this task was neglected. "From the moment you leave the frontier until you reach the Sacramento, you need untiring vigilance," wrote Joseph E. Ware in The Emigrants Guide to California.¹⁶ But untiring vigilance required alertness which was extremely difficult after a day of demanding travel. In his 1853 trail diary, Welborn Beeson wrote, "I had a good sleep last night which I needed very bad for I have been on guard for several nights in succession."¹⁷ At fifteen, Beeson would be considered young for guard duty. Most trains required that boys be at least fourteen years of age before they were assigned guard duty since the safety of an entire company depended on a careful watch. But if the older members of a train were desperately tired, they relented and allowed younger boys to guard stock.

Emigrants especially hated guard duty. A careless night's watch in which stock were lost or stolen could delay a train for days while the men and boys roamed the nearby areas chasing their lost animals. In 1859, the year in which eighteen-year-old Charles True traveled west, he and a friend drew guard duty at one of the many locations where night guards were compelled to herd their oxen considerable distances from camping sites where grass was more plentiful. Camped next to True were two guards from another train

who discovered their charges missing at 4:00 a.m. The boys feared returning to their camp with the unforgivable information, noted True, who was not sure what had caused the incident. As a result, the men and boys from the nearby company spent their Fourth of July following tracks and chasing cattle. It was a scenario which was repeated time after time during the entire course of the migration.¹⁸

After the company with which the family of John Rogers James was traveling had established a comfortable and seemingly safe camp near Fort Hall in Idaho, it was decided that a guard was not needed. This proved an unwise decision, however, and the James family and others in their company awoke to discover that some of the cattle had been scattered and that their largest oxen had been killed. Most members of the small company believed that it would be too dangerous to track their animals because of possible Indians within the immediate area. The James' lost an ox, but another unfortunate family lost an entire team. "There stood the wagon, wife and children, helpless in the wilderness," recounted John, noting that "our people contributed each what they could spare and fitted Mr. Foster with a makeshift of a team."¹⁹

Harriett Sherrill Ward believed that her eleven-year-old son, Willie, was too young for guard duty, but after six weeks of travel, he was nonetheless assigned the task. Wrote Harriett, "Encamped alone amongst the hills, the wolves howling horribly about us. . . . Willie is taking his first lesson in watching, not a very pleasant night." Two weeks later Harriett recorded that "Willie does the work of a man," a sentiment that was shared by other mothers.²⁰

By 1853, the year in which the Wards went west, the trails were crowded and wolves hovered near emigrant camps, waiting for scraps that might be left when the wagons pulled out in the mornings. On his second of two consecutive nights of guard duty in the desert, John Steele was extremely tired, but he fought to stay awake because of the large number of wolves in the vicinity. Recounted the teenager, “I was much surprised to find so many of these animals here. . . . They prowled around the camps in large bands, often coming within pistol shot, tempting me.”²¹

Indians also roamed around the camps of emigrants who passed through their lands and instilled fear in those who were on guard, especially younger boys. In 1846, soldiers at Fort Laramie told Jacob Harlan’s company that, despite their fears, Indians in the area would not steal animals. “We found this to be true,” remembered the eighteen-year-old, “and lost no animals by those Indians.”²² Guidebook authors, however, urged overlanders to be alert, warning that it was not unusual for Indians to elude them by dressing as various animals. Fifteen-year-old James Dickenson was not fooled when he saw a creature crawling on the ground near the livestock that he was protecting. The object proved to be a small group of Indians disguised as a wolves. But Dickenson remained calm, and instead of firing his rifle and causing a stampede, he simply rose from his sitting position with the gun half-cocked. Because of his cautious restraint, these Indians simply retreated in a zig-zag direction to avoid trouble.²³

Both Harlan and Dickenson traveled west in 1846, a year in which trail travel was comparatively light, and Native Americans were mainly interested in trading with passing

emigrants. But during the 1850s and 1860s, when the lines of wagon trains seemed endless, native tribes began to fear the end of their way of life. Emigrants increasingly feared attack which generated a general hysteria and, in turn, made night guards panicky. Younger guards were less experienced with firearms, and some lacked good judgment which occasionally resulted in tragedy. Mrs. W.C. White Kantner was nine-years-old in 1865 when she traveled west to Oregon with her family. For her, the most vivid memory of her journey occurred when a minister from the train left to relieve his son from guard duty. In the darkness of the night, the boy saw a figure wrapped in a blanket moving toward him. Convinced that the shrouded silhouette was an Indian, he fired his rifle, but when he approached the lifeless body he realized that the man he had shot was his father. “When he found he had killed his father, he nearly went crazy,” recounted Kantner.²⁴

Just as guard duty was most often relegated to males, cooking generally fell on the shoulders of the women and girls, and it was a chore that had to be performed at least two, if not three times a day. For the most part, families had their own utensils and foodstuffs and cooked for themselves, “there being no community interest in this respect,” wrote overland traveler Mary Variel.²⁵ Cooking over an open campfire at a new location each evening was a difficult and time-consuming task that often required ingenuity. When fuel became scarce, many emigrants depended on sagebrush or buffalo chips which many women and children collected daily while walking alongside the wagons. These “secondary fuels” were essential when emigrants moved across extremely dry land that possessed little timber, and, in the case of eight-year-old Jesse Applegate, who traveled

west in 1843 with the largest train that year, they were a cherished commodity. At a dry encampment, several young children had gathered buffalo chips for the cooks in their families and had placed their booty in piles.“ It seems we had claimed certain small districts adjacent to our respective stacks of chips,” recounted Jesse, “and we had to guard against trespassers.”²⁶ Eleven-year-old Clarence Bagley also made a practice of collecting the makeshift fuel, but he suspected that most of the “buffalo chips” he gathered on most days came from cattle that had preceded his train, rather than from buffalo. “By 1852,” he remembered, “the buffalo were frightened away from our vicinity and we never saw one on the trip.”²⁷ Emigrants often complained about the odor of the chips and the mess created from cooking with sagebrush. “I had the management of all the cooking and planning on my young shoulders and it isn’t much fun cooking with sagebrush . . . the flapjacks were black with ashes,” wrote Margaret White.²⁸

Martha Hill and her younger sisters assumed the chore of food preparation after their father fired the man he had hired to cook for them during their 1852 journey because of “his filth and wastefulness.” “Each of us had our regular work to do,” remembered Martha, “my sister Mary always made the biscuits . . . no small task for 15 people three times a day. . . . I did all the cooking on the stove and tended the fires.” The Hills had the luxury of a stove, at least until they abandoned it in the mountains. The dishes used for cooking and eating were made of tin. The girls had packed glassware, but it soon broke due to rough roads and Martha noted how difficult it was for her mother to drink from a tin cup.²⁹ Eight-year-old Nettie Taylor inherited the task of cooking for her extended

family most of the way to Oregon and did so without the advantage of a stove. After she had learned to cook over an open fire from her aunt and cousin, Nettie prepared most of the food for her family for the remainder of their journey. Contrastingly, her mother, Clarice Taylor, “did not have the pioneer spirit. She refused to cook for the family because she had never cooked on a campfire before; the smoke hurt her eyes; she burned her fingers, and buffalo chips didn’t make a good campfire.”³⁰

Daily chores, however repugnant, seemed mundane and uncomplicated compared with the physical labor that was needed to move wagons and families across rivers, deserts and mountains. The work was “appalling” as one emigrant man put it. Early pioneers did not benefit from the road-building that would later be performed by the army, and so these people, who, in addition to enduring a rigorous overland journey, also had the grueling task of clearing timber and rocks to make a path for wagons when they reached higher elevations. “The trees were cut just near enough to the ground to allow the wagons to pass over the stumps and a road through the forest was only cleared out wide enough for a wagon to pass along,” remembered Jesse Applegate with reference to his company’s passage through the Blue Mountains enroute to Oregon in 1843.³¹

All emigrants, whether bound for Oregon or California and regardless of the year in which they traveled, were faced with the daunting task of ascending and descending the steep slopes of mountains. Mary Medley, aged twelve in 1852, described the procedure that was implemented when her company crossed the Sierra Nevadas on their way to California:

This is the way it was managed: A dozen yoke of oxen were hitched to one wagon and with hard pulling they reached the top. After all the wagons were over, we took lunch on the top of the mountains, and then prepared to go down, which was more dangerous than going up, for in places the mountain was very steep. One yoke of oxen was hitched to a wagon, and one at a time went down. Heavy chains were fastened on behind the wagon and as many men as could catch hold of the chains did so, and when the wagon started they pulled back to keep the wagon from running down the mountain and killing the oxen.³²

Before overlanders attempted the dangerous undertaking, many were compelled to discard heavy and unnecessary goods, including treasured keepsakes that they had meticulously hauled since the inception of their journeys. Hundreds of emigrants spoke of the trails being littered with items such as furniture, broken wagons, stoves, trunks, heavy utensils and mining machinery. “In one day, James F. Reed has gone from being the richest man in the Donner Party to being the poorest in possessions,” noted contemporary Donner-Reed Party observer, Frank Mullen, Jr.³³ While crossing the Great Salt Lake Desert, Reed was compelled to leave two of his three wagons, and his daughter, Patty Reed, who pleaded to take some of her toys, was told to say good-bye to her dolls. She managed, however, to hide her favorite wooden doll in the hem of her apron and told no one for fear of punishment. The doll proved to be a comfort for the eight-year-old during her entrapment in the Sierra Nevadas in 1846.³⁴

At such demanding stages of their journeys, women and children, in addition to climbing steep cliffs, often carried bags loaded with goods or carried younger children who required help. Mary Variel carried her two children, one at a time, over the steepest

sections of the Sierra Nevadas. She carried one child for about a hundred yards, placed him in a crevice, and then returned for her daughter and repeated the pattern over the mountains.³⁵ At his relief camp in the Sierra Nevadas in 1849, J. Goldsborough Bruff wrote of numerous cases in which children were an essential part of their caravans. “A Prussian family pass,” wrote Bruff, “accompanied by a pony and a cow packed with bedding and other necessities, a steer laden with provisions, camp kettles, and implements driven by a 12-year-old son who carries an infant tied to his back, Indian fashion, while the rear is brought up by the wife.”³⁶ A similar entry read, “girls quite pretty carried heavy knapsacks, their naked toes protruded through broken shoes.”³⁷

It was also during these difficult desert, mountain, and river crossings that children helplessly watched the suffering of animals whom they had grown to love. Because their parents were consumed with the demands of the journey, the emotional needs of their children were often filled by the animals who traveled with them. “I must pay a tribute to our wheel oxen, Dick and Berry, who drew the family wagon all the way across the plains,” remembered Mary Medley, who went on to describe the pair of oxen as “gentle, kind, patient and reliable.” She felt their pain when they were struck by wagons when the men were not able to hold them back on steep cliffs.³⁸

Numerous accounts revealed the devastation that young emigrants endured if something unfortunate happened to one of their favorite animals. Little could be done to console Martha Hill after her horse, Kate, suffered a scorpion bite and had to be shot since recovery was not possible. She mourned the loss for many days.³⁹ Fifteen-year-old Rachel

Taylor shared the same fate when she watched as a hired hand mercifully shot her horse, Babe, after the animal had become twisted in some rope. The children in her train were especially affected by the untimely death of this favorite horse. Wrote Rachel, “some tears were shed as we left him on the plains.”⁴⁰

Welborn Beeson, Elizabeth Lord, and Charles True witnessed members in their trains attend to oxen that had fallen into sinking wells or drank poisoned alkali water. For Beeson, the event occurred while he was on guard duty near a valley with sinking wells. He had noticed that one of the oxen suddenly sank down into a “seemingly bottomless” well and had failed to surface. It took several men and much effort to successfully pull “Bill” out of the well.⁴¹ Shortly after her company had successfully crossed the Green River, Elizabeth Lord’s father discovered his oxen to be extremely sick, poisoned from alkali water. It was difficult for Elizabeth to watch as her father attempted to thrust bacon down their throats, a procedure that many emigrants spoke of employing when their cattle became sick.⁴² Similarly, Charles True was devastated when some of the animals which had been faithful to the Trues throughout their journey drank from poison wells and died. “We presented a distressed and mournful family,” wrote True, whose family was slowed by the loss of stock and forced to drop back from their company.⁴³

Because children turned to their animals for comfort, it was excruciatingly difficult to watch them suffer at the hands of a cruel owner or brutal teamster. Wrote sixteen-year-old Sarah Cummins, “the judicious and kind would control their teams with kind words and wait patiently for the poor jaded beasts to choose their footing, while the more

unmerciful would resort to volumes of enathemas and the lashing of their great whips. . . . I would if possible ride out of the range of such voices and words.”⁴⁴ Eighteen-year-old George Hunter traveled west with a family named Kent, consisting of a man, wife, son and several daughters. When the entire family contracted cholera, George, in a charitable gesture, drove the Kent wagon and proceeded to do so even after the son, Ben Kent, became well. But it proved to be a fiasco because of Kent’s “mean disposition.” As George Hunter put it, “he continually quarreled with his father, mother, and sisters, and fighting his team. Finally, his oxen became so unruly from his abuse, that he couldn’t manage them at all.” After another episode of blatant cruelty, George reacted and cracked a whip over Ben’s head. The incident resulted in fervent animosity between the two families and contributed to their eventual split-up west of Fort Laramie.⁴⁵

Orson Stearns, aged ten during his 1853 overland trip, was appalled with the way a man in his company dealt with one of his milk cows. After his company had made camp near the Des Moines River in Iowa, Orson described the scene, “some men put a rope on the cow, tied her to a tree, making her hind legs fast to another tree and proceeded to give her a terrible flogging.” The owner told the horror-struck younger members of the train that this particular cow needed to be disciplined every three or four weeks so that she would remain gentle for milking. But, for the remainder of their journey the children in Stearn’s train remembered the owner as a cruel man who often lied to excuse his brutality.⁴⁶

Although young emigrants cared for and developed a deep affection for the larger animals in their trains, they especially lavished love on their dogs which remained their most cherished pets. Dogs provided children with joy, companionship, protection, and a connection to their former homes. The first phase of the trek was relatively easy for dogs, but as travel became more difficult, they suffered just like the people. When Mary Ellen Todd's dog, Rover, began to lag behind the train and to walk with a limp, her mother made him some shoes. Despite this effort, the shoes were clumsy and the only solution for the fatigued pet was to ride on a horse with Mary Ellen's brother, John.⁴⁷ While crossing the hot sand of the Platte Valley, the True's dog, Prince, suffered from cracked and bleeding feet and "began to sit on his haunches and cry," remembered Charles True who applied cloth to the effected areas. But the bandages would not stay in place and Prince was then allowed to travel under the spring seat of the family wagon.⁴⁸

Many dogs were unable to survive mountain, desert and river crossings and their deaths were always a blow to the entire family. "It was a sad incident for me, my heart was nearly broken," lamented James Braly whose dog, Bull, drowned while his company crossed the Osage River.⁴⁹ The White family dog became so frightened during a severe thunderstorm on the plains that he ran away and was missing for three weeks, noted Margaret White. Her brother, determined to take action, decided to ride back for several miles and miraculously he found the dog with another train. The family was ecstatic to have him back, only to watch him deteriorate and finally perish during their oppressive crossing of the desert.⁵⁰ A similar incident involved the children of Amelia Knight during

their 1853 journey. When the party approached Soda Springs in California, Amelia recorded that “our poor dog gave out with the heat and sand so that he could not travel, the boys have gone back after him.” The rescue was successful and the dog continued on with the family.⁵¹

But dogs were not always welcomed by other members of a company, and their presence, at times, developed into heated points of contention. The most common complaint involved their barking which often resulted in the interruption of precious sleep, and occasionally triggered stampedes. Other grievances concerning dogs included their need for valued water during desert crossings, and the possibility that the rigors of the trip would cause them to “go mad” as was the case in 1842 with the first large train that headed west for Oregon. This company was comprised of 105 members, including a significant number of women and children. In most companies, it was typically the responsibility of a train’s captain to settle disputes over property, and overlanders considered their dogs property. These early emigrants were preparing to cross the Kansas River when captain Elijah White recommended that all dogs be shot for fear they should go mad and become rabid when the company traveled across dry land. The women and children were sickened by what they considered an unnecessary cruelty and some of the men agreed with them and felt that the killing of all dogs as a preventative for madness was unwarranted. But when the proposition came to a vote, two-thirds of those with a vote yielded to their captain’s wish and all dogs were duly shot. Those who carried out their orders “went resolutely about their work amid the cries and screams of the children, as

well as the victims,” wrote historian Hubert H. Bancroft.⁵² Medorem Crawford, a member of the company, recorded in his journal that twenty-two dogs were killed, although the number has been disputed. The incident, referred to in trail history as the “dog encampment,” resulted in the persistence of negative feelings toward Elijah White which eventually ran so deep that he became ineffective as captain and was replaced by fellow-traveler Landsford Hastings.⁵³

This early incident would not be the last time that a company’s captain would order the killing of dogs. Mary Variel and her children observed the shooting of a dog during her 1852 journey. “We sustained a loss we felt very keenly, one of our dogs was detected running after some sheep. . . . The owner [of the sheep] insisted the dog be killed and had to be sacrificed.”⁵⁴ Similarly, after the train with which Elizabeth Wood traveled had passed Fort Hall in 1851, some cattle became frightened by a barking dog. Wrote Elizabeth, “they run against the wagons, broke the wheels and tongue of ours, and bawled and pitched around till they finally got loose and run off in estanpede.” Like the 1842 episode, despite objections, all dogs, guilty or innocent, including the Wood family pet, were shot in compliance of captain’s orders.⁵⁵

Despite their potential nuisance, dogs provided joy for young emigrants and often proved their value to overlanders. Children were filled with pride if their dog contributed to the safety of their company. In 1853, a year in which the trails were crowded with families, George Himes’ dog, Frank, assisted his family and other travelers in his train on more than one occasion. The Himes had only traveled about six miles from their home in

Illinois when, after making their first camp near a small town, two inebriated men wandered into their campsite. "Father told them they were welcome to look around, but that his dog, Frank, would bite them if they attempted to take anything." But these two curiosity-seekers did not take the older Himes' advice and proceeded to taunt his children in his absence. They suggested to the children that, for the dog's own good, they should tie him up. Both men were bitten and instantaneously attempted to shoot the "brute," but they were deterred when Mr. Himes returned and "stood guard over the faithful animal with rifle in hand until the drunken men and their friends were disposed of."⁵⁶

In addition to the soul-like relationships children developed with their animals, they, like adults, found joy in simple pleasures such as good food, interaction with other children, observing new and unusual scenery along the way, and singing and dancing on special occasions. There was no greater ecstasy for emigrants than tasting food that was different from their daily fare of bread, bacon, rice, beans and dried fruits. As they moved across the plains many cooks learned to adapt and used ingredients that were available on the prairie, such as small game or wild currants. Travelers feasted on buffalo, deer, duck and other small game, fish from the rivers and streams, and herbs and berries from the surrounding lands. According to Jesse Applegate, "emigrants were always hungry . . . an emigrant not hungry was thought to be ill."⁵⁷ A rare treat were pies made from berries and currants that travelers found along the ravines and hillsides in higher country.

Because her boys were successful at gathering currants along the Boise River in Idaho, Amelia Knight was able to make "a nice lot of currant pies."⁵⁸ When the train with

which Henry Gilfry traveled neared the summit of the Rocky Mountains in 1852, he sensed that with the stock growing weaker, the grass thinner, and the food more scarce, difficult times were not over. His pessimism was somewhat relieved when his mother presented her family with a jack rabbit pie, “a great delicacy to us.”⁵⁹ Eight-year-old Elizabeth Lord was amazed at the swiftness displayed by her mother after she had spotted a prairie dog digging a hole along the Platte River. “She seized him by his hind legs and as she jerked him out, swung him with great force against a tree which killed him instantly. She knew that given a moment’s time he would set his sharp teeth into her hand, but she was too quick for him . . . we children ate him . . . it was fat and delicious.”⁶⁰

Most emigrants, whatever age, were awed by the landmarks which they encountered on their overland journeys. Ash Hollow, Courthouse and Jail Rocks, Chimney Rock and Scotts Bluff in Nebraska, as well as Independence Rock and Devil’s Gate in Wyoming were important distance markers that enlivened the road west for weary travelers. Chimney Rock, a favorite campsite described by most every diarist, stood approximately 500 feet high during the migration years and was particularly intriguing because it was visible for days before it was reached. It was “quite a curiosity,” noted Margaret White who added that those emigrants who walked ahead of the train to get a closer look at the rock “with a chimney” wearily returned failing to reach their destination.⁶¹ Appearing like an outpost of the Rocky Mountains to overland traveler Thomas Royal, it “loomed larger to us in imagination than in reality. . . . The children of the train expected to see smoke coming out of it and were quite disappointed that none did.”⁶²

Although thousands of passing emigrants carved their names on Courthouse and Chimney Rocks, it was Independence Rock, “the register of the desert,” named by early emigrants who reached this point by the Fourth of July, where most immortality-aspiring travelers wished to leave their names. Barnet Simpson remembered that most of the travelers in his company gathered at the base of the rock and used tar or knives to scratch their names.⁶³ In 1846, the year in which this ten-year-old traveled west, emigrants generally had their choice of space. But by 1863, travelers often had to climb to find a spot to carve their names and then carefully descend the rock by using ropes. Flora Isabelle Bender’s train reached the turtle-shaped rock a week after Independence Day that year. Wrote the fifteen-year-old, “I went to the top of Independence Rock. I would not have missed it for a pretty thing. I never saw anything equal to that.”⁶⁴ Similarly, eleven-year-old Elisha Brooks, recounted that when his family approached any one of the anticipated natural wonders along the way, it was like “meeting a friend in a weary land.” When they reached Independence Rock, Elisha and his siblings consumed the day searching for their father’s name. In search of gold, he had made the journey to California in 1850, two years before his family ventured west to join him.⁶⁵

Usually within a day after they departed Independence Rock, emigrants reached Devil’s Gate, a narrow canyon in Wyoming where the Sweetwater River cuts through a ridge of solid granite, approximately four hundred feet high. Children were especially mesmerized with this natural wonder. “The river runs through steep mountains of rock, the walls on either side are very straight . . . truly, a better name could not be found,”

wrote Nellie Slater.⁶⁶ Eleven-year-old Willie Sherill experienced “awe mingled with fear . . . he laughed and sang and appeared as if he hardly knew how to express his delight,” wrote his mother, Harriett Sherill Ward.⁶⁷ And, although she did not mention the fact that July 22nd was her fifteenth birthday in her journal, Rachel Taylor spent the day with friends exploring Devil’s Gate, which she found “as wild and rugged as could be imagined.”⁶⁸

Other forms of entertainment were completely man-made and could be employed at any location along the trail. Many overlanders affirmed that singing and dancing were favorite ways to relax. When travel agent Sidney Roberts formed a company bound for California in 1849, Article XVIII of the Articles of Agreement specifically addressed the issue of entertainment. It read: “The Company shall have the privilege of a Band of Music, organized according to the wishes of the company, to cheer up their spirits and gladden their hearts.”⁶⁹ Helen Mar Kimball, daughter of Mormon church leader Heber Kimball, spent the summer of 1846, her seventeenth year, with other prospective emigrants in Kanesville, Iowa. She was not well on a July day when William Pitt’s band was scheduled to play for these suffering emigrants who would be future founders of Salt Lake City. The Nauvoo Brass Band, as it was known, traveled along the trail in Iowa and played in the towns and villages they passed through, earning money to purchase provisions for their own journeys. Determined not to miss the event, Helen wrote, “This was delightful, especially to the young people, and though I was very unwell through the night, it was out of the question for me to forego such a pleasure.”⁷⁰

In addition to singing and dancing, young people frequently gathered together to tell tales of their childhood, their experiences along the trail, or simply to joke with one another. Martha Hill delightfully described such a scene, “One would almost picture despair on all our faces after the strenuous day we had all passed through, but not so. . . . My brother was always a great factor in keeping everyone in good spirits, and this night he had jokes to tell on all the men, which sent them off to bed with peals of laughter. When one could see the funny side to hardships, he must indeed have a God-given sense of humor.”⁷¹

Organized games also were favorite pastimes for children, providing them with an opportunity to interact without the rigor that was required while traveling. Unlike adults, who often seemed to be preoccupied with and apprehensive about their future, children seemed to live day-to-day, savoring the pleasures of the present time. For five-year-old Elizabeth Ann Coonc and her three siblings, play began in the tent that was stretched across her front yard in Illinois while preparations for her family’s journey were underway.⁷² In the early stages of her journey, overland traveler Sarah Royce noted that her two-year-old daughter, Mary, a child accustomed to the “accompaniments of civilization,” thought that sleeping in a tent was like “camping out.”⁷³ For 1860 overlander Helen Clark, a vivid memory of the children in her train playing Indian, “armed with miniature bows and arrows,” running and shouting up and down the line of wagons, remained with her for a lifetime. At least before they reached the mountains, the journey “was a picnic to them.”⁷⁴

Margaret Hecox observed that her children took pleasure in making the best use of what was available to them. The girls frequently played school with the books they had packed, played house in the wagons, and endlessly tried to create games out of work.⁷⁵ Inez Eugenia Adams regularly kept herself amused by stringing beautiful blue beads which her mother “had the forethought to provide.”⁷⁶ And, six-year-old William Colvig’s mother set aside time with her son to improve his reading skills during their six months of travel. Pilgrim’s Progress and McGuffey’s First and Second Readers were a two of the books that Helen Colvig expected her son to recite from.⁷⁷

Despite efforts on the part of some mothers to encourage their sons to read and practice spelling while traveling, most emigrant boys preferred activities that were more physical. While laying over at the Whitman Mission on their way to Oregon in 1847, John and Jim Braly enjoyed their reprieve from travel by “roughhousing” with Frank and John Sager who had been living at the mission and were the same ages as the Bralys. Ten days after the Bralys left the mission, they learned that the Sager boys had been killed by Cayuse Indians.⁷⁸ Emigrant boys also took pleasure in practicing their shooting skills. Some boys traveling with Helen Carpenter were euphoric to find the skull of a man near one of their camps along the Platte River and, to the horror of the author, they had a gay time tossing it in the air and using it for a target.⁷⁹

While laying over for a few days of rest at Fort Hall, eight-year-old Jesse Applegate and some friends found an ox near their camp that most likely had been slaughtered by some members of their company and left to rot. The weather was warm

and the animal's stomach or "paunch" was swollen to the "size of a large barrel." A competition was immediately launched in which the boys ran and lunged head-first into the stomach of the ox and it had been decided that the participant who recoiled the furthest would be declared the winner. "The sport was found to be very exciting," recounted Jesse, "and there grew up a rivalry between the boys as to who could butt the hardest."⁸⁰ One determined player, a boy named Andy Baker, gathered a tremendous amount of speed, leapt from the ground, and entered the stomach of the ox. After the sudden impact, the dead animal's stomach snapped shut and closed tightly around Andy's neck. After he had failed to bounce back, his startled friends gathered around and determinedly pulled him out by his legs. What had begun as fun, nearly ended in tragedy, and the tale of Andy Baker and the ox's paunch was a story that these first Oregon emigrants told for many years.⁸¹

Boys also found grand excitement in hunting, especially buffalo and antelope, and, according to historian John D. Unruh, Jr., more of these larger animals were killed for sport than for serving as a source for food: "It was a rare company of overlanders which did not temporarily forget all trail discipline at their first sighting of a buffalo herd and go racing off in reckless pursuit. The passing overlanders began the senseless assault on the great bison herds which ultimately led to their near extinction."⁸² Traveling in the early migration year of 1845, Andrew Chambers found that buffalo and antelope were plentiful at least for some twelve to fifteen miles along the South Platte. On one evening after his company had camped in this vicinity,

Chambers reported killing fifteen buffalo. “Hunters sometimes put a handkerchief on a stick,” he recounted, “and antelope came around to see what it was and we often killed them by shooting from the wagons.”⁸³

But, by the time Charles True made his overland trip in 1859, both species was depleted and emigrants often encountered more buffalo left to rot than they did herds of live buffalo. The eighteen-year-old desperately wanted to participate in a hunt during his overland trip, if only to hold the horses while the better marksmen dismounted and fired. Near Fort Laramie, his wish was realized as he and some traveling companions ventured out in pursuit of buffalo. Instead of encountering adult buffalo or antelope, the hunters spotted two buffalo calves and decided that by shooting them, their mothers would remain, enabling the hunters to kill the entire bunch. But after seeing a band of Indians in the distance, the group made a hasty return to camp because, noted True, “despite the fact that it was often ignored, the Indians had an unwritten law that no cows, calves, or yearlings were to be shot during this season.”⁸⁴ So, at least in this vicinity, during a year in which tension between Indians and emigrants was high, this group chose not to test their resolve.

Like younger children, teenagers also enjoyed spending time with each other, and, at least in the case of John Lawrence Johnson, a friendship with a young girl blossomed into romance. During his 1851 overland trip to the Willamette Valley, John became infatuated with sixteen-year-old Jane Jones. He was dismayed, however, when his father, a Presbyterian minister who disapproved of the budding relationship,

decided to cease traveling with the Jones family. After a tearful departure, the two teenagers, pledging to remain in contact, agreed that whoever was traveling ahead of the other would leave letters on decaying buffalo skulls and would use the pseudonym “Laurie.” When the Johnsons made their first camp after the families had split, John described himself as “heartsick and disgusted.” The two young emigrants joyfully reunited after four weeks of travel at which time Jane told John that “not a day passed since we parted but what I have found a letter signed by “Laurie.””⁸⁵

Whatever their definition of excitement, the pursuit of pleasure also meant that some younger emigrants inevitably got into trouble and faced unpleasant consequences from their parents, guardians, or other adults in their companies. Ironically, relatively few cases of child neglect or harsh parental discipline appear within the surviving diaries of children. Possible contributing factors for the absence of such incidents might be that each day of overland travel required intense physical exertion and children were most likely tired at the end of each day, leaving little time and energy for disruptive activities. Other than members of their extended families, most of their playmates were other children whom they had only recently met, a fact which might also have inhibited disorderly conduct. With the exception of Mormon companies, overland trains were generally comprised of emigrants with a variety of religious beliefs and dissimilar ethnic backgrounds, which might have led parents to punish their children in private to avoid criticism of their methods. Also, adults who kept journals rarely revealed emotion and, in all probability, they considered the

manner in which they disciplined their children too private to reveal on paper. If such episodes were more numerous, they, in all likelihood, were left unrecorded.

Additionally, if the parents of pioneer children followed the trend for child-rearing that was gaining popularity in America during the mid-nineteenth century, their tendency would have been to be more lenient with their children than their parents had been with them. By rejecting a patriarchal monarch after the American Revolution, Americans moved toward what some historians refer to as a republican society from which emerged the idea of “enlightened child-rearing,” asserted Jacqueline S. Reinier in her study of the history of American childhood. It was a more affectionate way of managing children in which mothers had increased influence, at least on younger children, and educators were encouraged to listen to their students and instill in them the confidence to rely on their own judgement. “As this culture coalesced,” wrote Reinier, “hope for the new republic focused on the malleable child in an altogether unprecedented way.”⁸⁶

Although recorded cases of neglect and discipline were surprisingly few, they nonetheless occurred. In some cases, children suffered at the hands of merciless parents, and in other instances, children knew that their punishments were deserved. Recording the condition of emigrants who passed through his Sierra Nevada camp in 1849, J. Goldsborough Bruff revealed a glaring case of child neglect which involved a four-year-old boy and his father, a man named Lamkin who left his wife in St. Louis, took their child, and traveled west with another woman. Describing the man as “an

inhuman wretch,” Bruff was amazed that the boy had endured the journey so long and he noted that the youngster suffered from exposure and malnourishment. “His little boy he treated in the most brutal manner,” wrote Bruff in November, “suffering it to want for everything, and then beating him unmercifully for crying.”⁸⁷ Because the boy was not fit to travel when Lamkin, decided to continue his push for the mines, he lingered at the camp for six more weeks under the care of Bruff and others while his condition deteriorated. By January 1st, he was beyond help, no longer able to eat. Bruff’s entry for that day read “we done all we could for the poor little sufferer, but by 11 a.m. he was extricated from all the hardships of this life.”⁸⁸

As Gentiles, Kate Nye Starr, her husband, and their newly adopted seven-year-old daughter traveled west with a Mormon company in 1862. The family felt fortunate to travel with the group, and they made an effort to keep to their own business. But when a man proceeded to whip his small son with an ox-whip, Kate Starr was unable to withhold her concern. The emigrant father was from Starr’s home state of New York, and so Kate decided to befriend him before offering her opinion that the punishment was too severe. Her approach was effective since the man was acquainted with the birth parents of her daughter who lived in New York, leading him to be more receptive to her intrusion. “I urged him not to whip his boy any more, for he was all worn out with walking so far,” wrote Kate, who at the same time, offered that the child ride in her wagon.⁸⁹

Traveling ten years before the Starrs was Robert Lee Sharp who kept a journal during his overland trip to California, a passage that he and a companion had purchased in St. Joseph, Missouri. Like Kate Starr, Sharp was horrified by the way a father treated his daughter, son-in-law, and their child, his grandchild, after the two men had argued. It happened near Fort Kearny in 1852, a year in which cholera raged along the Platte River, and a year in which other trains were reluctant to pick up stray emigrants. The company had already buried several travelers, and Sharp himself was despondent and contemplated returning home. His gloomy mood was intensified when this father chose to abandon his daughter, her husband and their sick child, leaving them to an uncertain fate on the prairie. For Sharp and others, this drastic method of discipline was hard to believe, “The child died the same day, and some of our men buried it for him . . . what a forlorn state to be in, without any place to go, without any money and 300 miles from the States. They refused to take them in at the Fort. Whether they will have to perish or whether some emigrant will take them in, we know not. I fear this is only a foretaste of what we shall see before we get to California.”⁹⁰

Less severe but probably more common were the cases of Annie Belshaw and Rachel Woolley. These two girls received spankings for ignoring stern warnings from their parents not to swim in the Platte River, and they both later admitted that their punishments were warranted. During her journey to Oregon in 1848, Rachel Woolley remembered her mother as being “most indulgent” during her overland trip. But Mary

Woolley's tolerance declined after Rachel ignored her many warnings not to bathe in the river, even though other parents allowed their children to do so. "My runaway practices clung to me," noted Rachel, "and after the many warnings I had received, I found father with a rope in his hand waiting to receive me." The whipping had its intended effect and Rachel ceased her disobedience.⁹¹ Similarly, Annie Belshaw, who went west five years later, was warned not to swim or play in the Platte River. She too ignored several words of warning and proceeded to playfully paddle around in the river while some of the women did their wash. Knowing that Annie was defying the wishes of her parents, one of the women took it upon herself to physically reprimand the child. And, when Annie's mother was told of her child's behavior, she was so angry with her daughter that she spanked her again and Annie Belshaw, like Rachel Woolley, never repeated the behavior.⁹²

Tense situations also resulted when children witnessed their fathers or other adult men discipline or mistreat their wives. Two sober accounts were revealed by Virginia Reed and Elizabeth Geer. Traveling with the Donner-Reed party in 1846 was Lewis Keseberg, his wife Philippine, and their two small children, son, Lewis Jr. and daughter, Ada. Keseberg was described as an educated but cruel man who resorted to beating his wife when he became angry. According to Virginia Reed, "Keseberg was married to a young and pretty German girl, and used to abuse her and was in the habit of beating her till she was black and blue." His cruelty towards his wife left an impression on twelve-year-old Virginia who further believed that Philippine Keseberg

was spared additional beatings because her father, James Reed, warned him to control his temper. “Keseberg did not dare to strike his wife again, but he hated my father,” Virginia further noted.⁹³ Lewis Keseberg stayed with the Donners until the end and was the last survivor to be rescued at the lake camps in the Sierra Nevadas in April 1847. His two children did not survive the disaster.⁹⁴

One year later, in September 1847, Elizabeth Geer, referring to a family with whom she traveled by the name of Marcum, wrote, “This morning one company moved on except one family.” It was late in their journey and most members of this Oregon-bound company were exceptionally weary. They had been on the road for months during an early migration year in which emigrants lacked the benefits of much knowledge from previous overlanders, improved roads and government support. Two women had been widowed and both of them had small children. So, tensions ran high among these emigrants even before the day when this mother became angry and refused to move. After three hours of coaxing by her husband had failed, some of the men decided to remove the smaller children from the wagon after which the woman set a wagon full of supplies on fire. Pushed to his limits, Marcum, according to Elizabeth Geer, “saw flames and come running to put it out, and then mustered spunk enough to give her a good flogging.” It was a draining experience for everyone traveling with the family.⁹⁵

Throughout their journeys, some children inevitably witnessed their parents in unflattering positions, but the majority of their accounts praise the courage and

stamina of their parents. Many young emigrants described the intense pride which they felt observing their parents work hard, assume tremendous burdens, take risks and help others. John Roger James often wondered how his mother, a small woman who had employed household servants in Wisconsin, endured the tedious camp duties that were required of her during the 1850 journey.⁹⁶ Likewise, Mary Ellen Todd, aged nine in 1852, recounted that her mother did anything possible to make her family members more comfortable, “and she certainly adapted herself to all sorts of conditions that I learned to admire.”⁹⁷ Reflecting on the burden his mother and other women endured, Henry Gilfry wrote, “Without you the commonwealth would not have been organized and chaos would have reigned in our trains and at our campfires.”⁹⁸

Young emigrants expressed comparable admiration toward their fathers. A day of rest for their team of oxen meant a day of hard work for the father of William McClellan who did all of his own shoeing and who also offered his services to other travelers.⁹⁹ Traveling during the peak cholera year of 1852, Clarence Bagley, then age eleven, remembered that his father was called upon at all hours to attend to those who suffered from the debilitating scourge. Although Daniel Bagley was not a physician, he wisely packed a large quantity of medicine. “No one was refused even if they couldn’t pay,” recounted Clarence.¹⁰⁰ When E. E. Tucker traveled west, a member from the train with which his family traveled fell from his wagon and suffered a broken leg during a stampede. After the train had made camp the same evening, a vote was taken among the heads of families about what was to be done with this man who

needed time to rest and recover. The men decided to leave him behind with provisions in the care of friendly Indians, hoping that he would be able to travel with another company. Tucker was proud of his father who was the only man to vote against such action and, “he backed up his vote by deciding to stay with him.” When the injured man was able to withstand the pain of a jolting wagon, Tucker placed him in his wagon and the family then caught up with the others.¹⁰¹

Many emigrants responded to such acts of mercy by praying and expressing their thanks to God. The prayers of overlanders were filled with pleas to God to protect them from potential daily dangers, but the decision to stop on the Sabbath and observe a day of worship continually divided trains. This tension was especially prevalent among Presbyterians and Methodists who adhered more stringently to their religious practices. As the son of strict Presbyterians, Joseph Wooley, at age eight, traveled to Oregon in 1863. “The wagon train was divided into two factions,” noted Joseph, “one would fiddle and dance at night and the other would hold camp meetings and prayer services.” The Wooleys believed that the fiddle was “an invention of the devil,” and Joseph attended the prayer sessions.¹⁰² Traveling to California with his strict Methodist family in 1847, eight-year-old William Trubody was caught dancing one night and knew that his father was serious when he was told to cease the behavior.¹⁰³

“At least the Sabbath has been kept,” wrote fifteen-year-old Rachel Taylor on a June Sunday in 1852 after she had witnessed her company divide over the issue of Sunday travel. The Taylors were traveling with the family of Thomas Royal who

responded to a plea for Methodist ministry in Oregon and who insisted on strict observance of the Sabbath. On more than one Sunday, Rachel's diary entries read "preaching under the tent," or "preaching as usual."¹⁰⁴ But, late in their journeys, Rachel's family and her uncle's family, the Sylvester Taylors, ended up traveling in different trains. Sylvester's Taylor's company continued to stop on Sundays, while Stephen Taylor's company pushed on, and this issue continued to divide the extended family even after they had settled in Oregon. Three years after their arrival, Sylvester Taylor wrote a letter to Thomas Royal in which he criticized the conduct of members of his brother's train: "From the time the train commenced traveling on Sundays, the tendency of things was rapidly downhill. . . . With the Sunday train, the religious influence was undiminished."¹⁰⁵ But in many companies, as months passed, Sunday travel ceased to remain merely a religious consideration and the need to stay on schedule made traveling necessary, and, for these reasons, Stephen Taylor defended his position.¹⁰⁶

Even if companies chose to observe the Sabbath by stopping for a day of rest and worship, remaining idle was nearly impossible. "A day of rest. It does not seem like keeping the Sabbath. Many wash and bake and do all their work," wrote Mary Stuart Bailey.¹⁰⁷ Children who helped with such chores on Sundays often longed for the rituals that they had practiced in the churches they had left in their hometowns. Wrote Maria Elliot, "The sun shines pleasantly this morning, and reminds me of the very many pleasant Sabbath mornings that I have attended church at home. Oh, how I wish

I could be with my loved friends today, and hear the truths proclaimed from the lips of our beloved pastor. While I write tears fill my eyes to think of the days that are passed never more to return.”¹⁰⁸ In many companies, however, Sunday was probably never observed as a religious day. According to historian Julie Roy Jeffrey, religious commitment in the west was weak. In 1866, no more than twenty-three percent of Americans were members of an established church, and missionaries were consistently discouraged by the lack of interest in their efforts. Wrote Jeffrey, “The West was a godless place for the godly.”¹⁰⁹

When families traveled west, the success of their journeys depended on the participation of all members, and children were an important part of the family structure. Most young participants were proud of their contributions, proud of their parents and other family members, and proud to be participants in the migration. When twelve-year-old Nellie Slater reached Oregon in 1862, she had completed a journey which was filled with excitement, danger, fright, work, sadness and joy. She described beautiful camping sites; she was fascinated by landmarks; she made friends with other children; she climbed steep cliffs; she buried her father; she witnessed her sister struggle through illness, and, like many other emigrant children, she arrived in Oregon in good spirits. “The place is pretty well filled with emigrants [sic] and they are still coming in all the time. . . . I will bring my journal to a close, and if it will be of any interest to any one who may read it, they will be entirely welcome. . . . So now I lay my pen aside and bid my journal adieu.”¹¹⁰

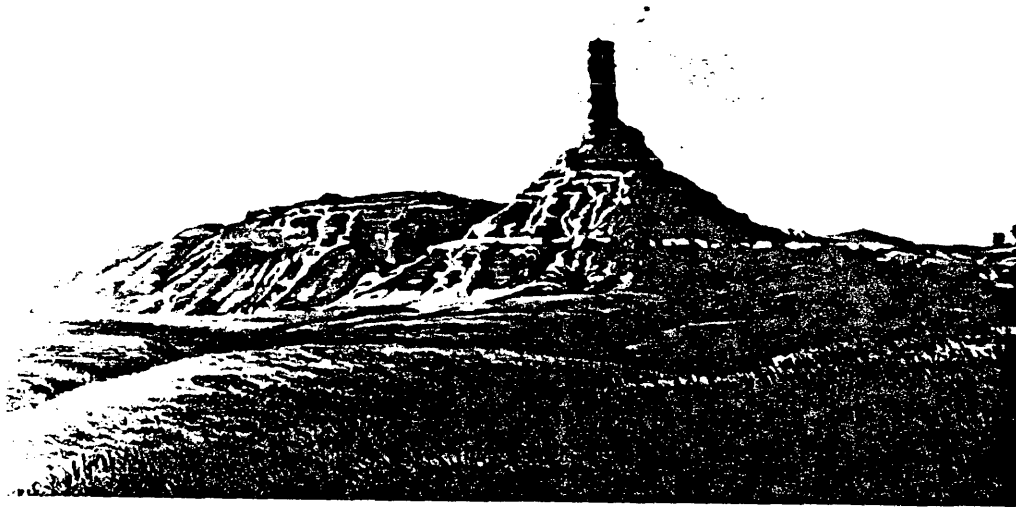


FIGURE 7

Chimney Rock

For slow-moving wagon trains Chimney Rock was visible to emigrants for days. It towers 470 feet above the Platte River, and probably stood 50 to 100 feet higher during the westward migration. The children of Thomas Royal were disappointed not to see smoke rising out of the chimney-shaped natural wonder.



FIGURE 8

Independence Rock

Independence Rock, “the register of the desert,” was named by early emigrants who reached this point by the Fourth of July. Thousands of overlanders carved their names on the turtle-shaped granite rock in Wyoming.

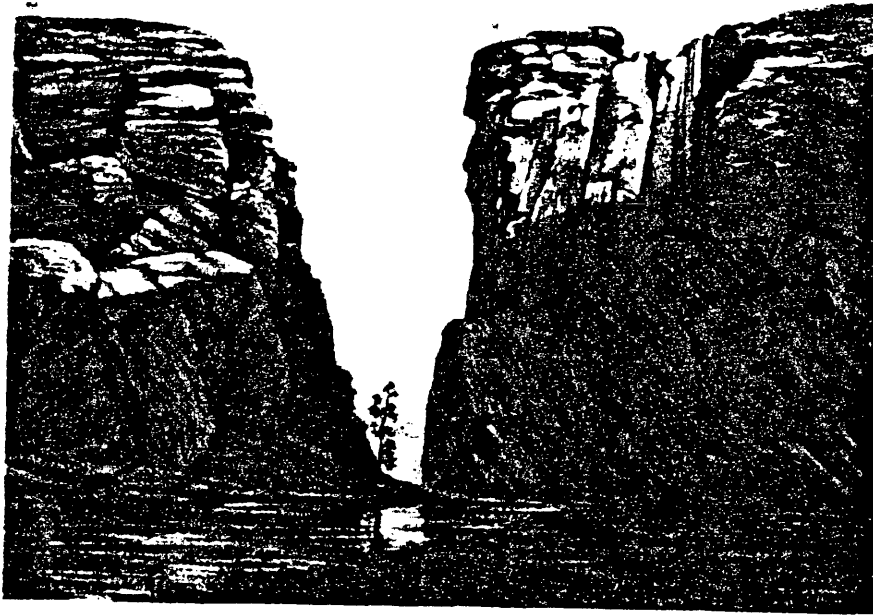


FIGURE 9

Devil's Gate

Emigrants of all ages were awed by Devil's Gate, a narrow canyon in Wyoming where the Sweetwater River cuts through a ridge of solid granite, approximately 400 feet high. In 1853, Rachel Taylor spent her fifteenth birthday exploring the natural wonder.



FIGURE 10

Buffalo Hunt at Scott's Bluff

Emigrants found excitement in hunting buffalo. During the migration, more buffalo were killed for sport than for serving as a source for food. By the late 1850s, the species was severely depleted.

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CONCLUSION

When families streamed west during the mid-nineteenth century into an untamed wilderness in search of better lives, they chose to undertake a journey which required courage, strength, and determination. Each day on the trail, men, women, and children were simultaneously faced with new challenges, risks, and dangers, as well as the monotony of daily routines. As members of traveling families, children were not simply passive participants in their parent's ventures. To the contrary, young emigrants were involved in virtually every aspect of their journeys west, which included preparations, leave-taking, work, walking great distances over rugged terrain, caring for the sick, and burying the dead. They adapted to the fragility of their own family relationships during a time of transition; they bonded with the other families of their wagon trains; they cared for and loved their animals; they were victims of horrific accidents; they endured extreme temperatures; they were awestruck by natural wonders; and they observed and commented on the various native peoples whom they encountered along the way.

Westering children also witnessed the manner in which adults responded to other emigrants who were virtual strangers in the early weeks of the sojourn. They observed the ways in which adults handled justice and the manner in which they treated Native Americans. Some young emigrants endured extreme privations, but, for the most part, they traveled in relative safety. Although to some extent their

experiences differed according to the motivations of their parents, their year of travel, their routes and destinations, and their socioeconomic status, all emigrant children were compelled to adjust to their unique circumstances, and most of these youths did so with a positive attitude and a spirit of adventure.

After the decision was made to go west, many families began their preparations well in advance of their spring departure. Before the Bralys left their Illinois home for Oregon in 1847, twelve-year-old John Braly traveled to St. Louis with his father to purchase wagons and supplies. It was a bittersweet moment when the family sold the home of his boyhood, including all its belongings. Likewise, fifteen-year-old Welborn Beeson helped his father purchase wagons and oxen, and prepare their farm for sale. Beeson began recording his experiences over a year before his family departed from Indiana for Oregon in March 1853. "This thing of breaking up the household and parting with old familiar things is something I am not used to," he wrote.¹ Throughout the winter of 1852, Abigail Jane Scott and her sisters helped their mother sew, make candles, and pack away foodstuffs for their journey to Oregon. The preparations seemed endless.

Although departure from a familiar home, friends, and relatives was emotional for all emigrants, some children seemed to avoid the intense sense of loss experienced by many older emigrants. Those children who traveled with extended families sensed security within their family units, and, in some cases, three generations of a family traveled together. For children, the excitement of heading west often overshadowed

the potential hardships of a cross-country journey that weighed heavily on adults. Many younger emigrants did not realize the enormity of the undertaking, and some wondered why their parents chose to head west. Sallie Hester, age fourteen in 1849, described her mother as “heartbroken” when it came time to say goodbye to friends and relatives in Bloomington, Indiana. Sallie’s outlook, however, was less negatively affected than her mother’s: “Giving up old associations for what? With a goodbye to kind teachers and schoolmates, we are off.”² When it came time for the Burt family to leave their Wisconsin home for Oregon in 1853, ten-year-old Ellen Burt held out hope that she would someday be reunited with her cousins, a hope that was rarely spoken about by adults. “Long hath been the dread of this sad time,” wrote Ellen, “but I trust my cousin’s promise that we shall meet again.”³

After they crossed the Missouri River, many emigrants felt they were leaving civilization as they knew it and they soon settled into a daily routine. Companies averaged ten to fifteen miles a day in which all capable travelers contributed to the maintenance of a moving community. Because most migrating families were Mississippi Valley farm families, the traditional sexual division of labor that was in place on farms was generally the same on the trail, and children emulated their parents. Men and older boys usually drove the oxen, mended wagons and tools, coordinated river and mountain crossings, and guarded the stock during the night. Women and girls cooked, washed, cleaned and packed wagons, and cared for younger children and sick travelers. Almost all young emigrants who left written records spoke

about caring for and developing a deep affection for the animals with which they traveled and they were exceptionally sensitive about the manner in which their cherished oxen were treated by teamsters.

In exceptional circumstances, children shouldered tremendous responsibilities. Elisha Brooks and Jasper Henry Lawn traveled with single mothers, and both of these boys who were not yet teenagers, drove their family's wagon for a large portion of their journeys. When his family became dangerously low on food before reaching the Willamette Valley, fourteen-year-old Octavius Pringle traveled over 125 miles through the Blue Mountains to purchase provisions and return with them to his family. Henry and John Ferguson, ages eleven and thirteen respectively, guarded the family wagon and supplies while their father went ahead with their mother and younger children to the settlements in California. They remained alone for three weeks, hunting wild game until their father returned for them. Similarly, eighteen-year-old Moses Schallenberger spent the winter of 1844 alone in a rude cabin in the Sierra Nevadas, subsisting on game which he trapped until he was rescued by members of his party.

The year in which children traveled west also affected their trail experiences. Early emigrants had the added burden of blazing trails, which required them to clear timber and rocks. It was back-breaking work, remembered Jesse Applegate, who was seven-years-old during his 1843 overland trip. There was little assistance with ferries as the initial parties of emigrants crossed swollen rivers and streams. Pioneers who traveled during the early 1840s also lacked the advantage of assistance and protection

from the forts which were later established by the government. Those families who traveled during the 1850s had the advantage of improved roads and better information from earlier emigrants. But they also traveled during years in which the trails were crowded, cholera raged, grass was depleted, and Indian problems were gradually increasing.

Overall, however, Indians posed little trouble for overlanders. Children were simultaneously fascinated with and afraid of the native peoples whom they encountered along the way, although most of them had little, if any, actual contact. Like adults, their journals were filled with descriptions of the way Native Americans dressed and the manner in which they approached trains to trade. Most tribes wanted food, alcohol, or clothing in exchange for passage through their lands. Although children such as Emeline and Christopher Trimble, Danny Marble, and Mary Kelly were caught up in deadly conflicts with Indians during the 1860s, their stories were the exceptions. Far more numerous are accounts in which Native Americans assisted emigrants with land routes, river crossings, or helped them pray for the sick and bury the dead. More Indians were injured or killed by white emigrants than emigrants were injured or killed by Indians.

Death from disease and accidents were greater fears for overlanders. Children suffered incredibly if they became sick or witnessed a family member lingering with illness. In 1844, the six children of Henry and Naomi Sager buried both of their parents who had died from mountain fever, and the children were cared for by other

emigrants until they reached the Whitman Mission in Oregon. Among hundreds of other children, Mary Medley, Nellie Slater, and Lucy Henderson left a family member buried on the trail, and they had no choice but to push on with little time for an expression of grief. An extraordinary number of children were injured or killed in accidents. Children fell from wagons, were run over by wagon wheels, and were victims of mishaps with animals or firearms. They endured the constant fears of drowning during the many river crossings, becoming lost in an unknown wilderness, or being attacked by the numerous wolves which hovered around emigrant campsites.

Younger emigrants were in a unique position to observe the way that adults conducted themselves under duress, and, in many cases, what they observed during these six or more months of their overland trips impacted their lives forever. To be sure, some children witnessed adults in unflattering positions, but, more often than not, they praised and respected the adults with whom they traveled, especially their parents. Rachel Woolley was one of many children whose mother was pregnant at the inception of their journeys. After giving birth to a baby girl in Wyoming, Rachel recounted “we never laid over a day in consequence of mother’s sickness. The Lord blessed her and fitted her to bear the journey.”⁴ Mary Jane Long presented a moving account of her mother sharing water with two sick children at a time when her own family had little fresh water. The fathers of Clarence Bagley and Martha Hill administered to other sick emigrants and willingly shared medicine. A theme throughout the memoirs of John Braly was admiration of his mother who “displayed

courage and divine strength . . . such blood as hers is indeed royal.”⁵ During his journey, Benjamin Franklin Bonney was moved by the empathy displayed by his mother when she wanted to take in a young Indian girl who was alone, naked and covered with sores.

And, when their journeys were completed, children often spoke about the sadness they felt leaving the emigrants with whom they had traveled. “It was like breaking up a large community composed of relatives who had lived near each other for generations,” recounted F.A. Goulder.⁶ Likewise, John Steele expressed satisfaction after his company had completed a safe journey, but, at the same time, the thought of leaving intimate associations was devastating. Wrote John, “Within a week we may be separated never to meet again on earth. How deeply we became attached to each other, and how painful the thought of separation.”⁷

In the end, the history of America is a history of people moving west and the migration which took place during the mid-nineteenth century was, according to historian Merrill J. Mattes, one of the ten greatest events in American history. Over 500,000 emigrants traveled 2000 miles in which they endured dust, extreme temperatures, poor roads, back-breaking work, and disease and death. It was the story of individual families carving out their destinies with an unflagging will. If the West was truly won, it was won by families, and traveling families only survived their journeys because of the participation of all members, from the very old to the very young.

So, in 1997, when members of the Mormon Church chose to celebrate the accomplishments of their ancestors by reenacting the difficult journey that the Pioneer Group had made during 1847, they indeed had just cause to rejoice. And, as was the case in 1847, children accompanied their parents, not as mere observers, but as participants. Two children who took part in the 1997 commemoration trek were nine-year-old Alicia Hulet and ten-year-old Jade Descamps, both of Salt Lake City. While camped at Fort Laramie, the girls spoke about how much they valued being included in this once-in-a-lifetime experience. "It really makes us learn how much they must have suffered, said Alicia."⁸ Like all participants in this recent journey, they wore traditional dress, ate dried beef, dried fruit and oatmeal, washed clothes with scrub boards, performed daily chores, took care of the younger children, and attended a daily service to honor the first Mormon pioneers. For them, the greatest hardship was walking long distances each day, although they preferred walking to riding in a jolting wagon. Like the first pioneer children, Alicia and Jade contributed to the completion of a successful journey.

NOTES

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